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MARCH

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10¢ DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

VOLUME XX MARCH, 1938 NUMBER 3

Complete Western Novel

Rawhide, Gunsmoke—And Texas Cattle!.....Walt Coburn 10

Toughest segundo of the thundering trails, Duke Loveless turned the tables on Texas renegades by fattening his own herd with their blotched-brand beef—which must still be paid for at the bitter cost of snarling midnight guns and dying men!

Two Complete Western Novelettes

Bullet-Harvest for Sodbusters.....Cliff Farrell 54

Wade Dalhart, scissor-bill leader, braved alone the wrath of a quick-triggered cowman legion so that his sodbuster neighbors might live to run away!

The Broken Arrow Man-Breaker.....Harry F. Olmsted 86

When Cole Travers saved the last of the once-great Broken Arrow herd, his old boss thanked him—with a strangling hempen noose!

Four Western Short Stories

Cattleman Blood Breaks the Drouth.....John G. Pearsol 42

Could the iron of one lawman's soul smother the fires of hate on a range gone mad?

Tinhorn—By Demand.....Harlan Graves 76

Euchre Sloan played his greatest, squarest game—with a deck marked by Death!

A Friend In Need for Tensleep.....Bart Cassidy 103

His own blood-money price paid Tensleep's way into a hidden double-cross gun-trap.

Old Hell-On-Wheels.....Ray Nafziger 112

All Frosty Falls, broken-down cowdog, asked of life was the chance to die—like a hero!

—And—

Stuff of the Frontier.....The Editors 4

Often the glorious dreams of the future were bought with sweat and life-blood.

Shoot First—And Live Longest!.....Trail Rider 9

That was the grim code of Marshal Bill Duff, who boasted that he never took a prisoner!

In the Saddle.....A Department 120

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THE COUNTRY'S LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE

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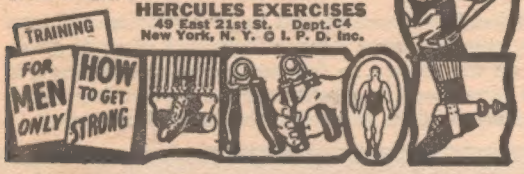

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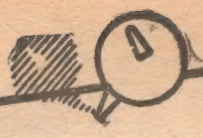
Stuff of the Frontier

THERE are few things so inspiring in the history of the old West as the vision of the great trek during the years of settlement. Then the setting sun shone red on the canvas-covered wagons holding men and women determined to seek the promise of a new day in the unknown land beyond the horizon. Yet, for all the lurking danger and the physical hardships of that great Westward sweep, the journey itself was but a proving ground for what must lay ahead. It was then that the real test of homely courage, of perseverance and the human stuff of empire must be made.

Few men during all that time, seemed less likely material to stand up under the gruelling ordeal than young Abel Martin, a slender youngster who had heeded the call of the vast frontier from far-away Vermont.

A quiet, plodding stripling, none too husky, Martin was the greenest pilgrim ever to set foot in the Stormy River country. He arrived gaunt and weakened by long weeks of pneumonia, and since he had bought his way from St. Joe with the last of his few dollars, he had nothing more than the patched and worn clothes on his back. Yet within him burned the fire and zeal of ambition, to make his name famous throughout the frontier, and somehow to attain the wealth that he had missed back on that rocky Vermont hill-

...out stock, and the ...s of Stormy ...t in all ...lf a ... a ...ich ...on ...gh ...s



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—and rode to the county seat to file on his claim.

From someone in town he heard tales of the vast herds in the Texas ranges, almost a thousand miles away. So Abel Martin saddled up the plough-horse and started off. That Texas trip took him longer than he'd expected, but by the time he arrived on the Pecos, he was tanned, husky, his hands calloused from earning his grub on the way, his body flat-muscled and straight from weary hours in the saddle.

Cattle! That was his dream, and what he lived for. Yet, though he managed to sign on as wrangler with one of the big outfits, he knew with a sickening feeling that he had long since sacrificed his Stormy Valley homestead. In two years he'd saved enough money to make a down payment on a piece of Texas range, and to run a few head of cattle on shares. Yet always in his mind was the vision of the distant rolling grass range and land which he could really call his own, and build up into something big.

Three years more, and his herd increased. He owned now some five hundred head outright. Yet when he mentioned that there was good land up to the north, those old Texas ranchers shook their heads and called him loco. But it was Abel Martin who took the first trail herd onto that new range in the North.

He and the two young Texans he'd brought with him fought drouth and marauding Indians; one of the men drowned in the swift, white-flecked water of the Red. Abel Martin looked in vain for another hand to take his place, and when he could find none, he tightened his belt and went on.

Once more he filed on a section, then took up more land in the name of his cowboy partner. He lived in the saddle, scarcely taking the time to eat or sleep, until he knew that little range like the back of his hand. Yet his troubles were not over. There came the bitter winter of '67 when stock froze standing against the blizzard blasts that swept down from the north.

And when the worst of it was over, he found that his herd had dwindled to nothing. Abel Martin, self-made cowman, was wiped out.

There was nothing to do but try it again, for something in that gaunt body refused to be licked. Once more he made his way, slowly and alone, back to Texas —but by this time the first trail herds were being shoved up to the end of steel and markets.

He knew the trails, so he hired out as trail boss to take the thundering herds up from Valdosa. Five years passed; he had almost enough money to make a new start. Two hundred head of cows were in his brand when he came back to Stormy Valley. He got land on a mortgage from a nearby rancher and started his spread.

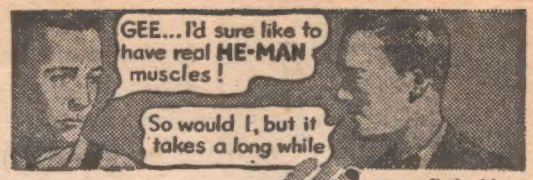
By sweating effort and work that would have broken many another, he clung grimly onto it. At last came the time when he owned it outright—a couple of thousand head of stock, a small range, a modest ranch-house.

Abel Martin looked into the dying sun from his shaded porch. He remembered the greenhorn kid who had first set his eyes on Stormy Valley—he remembered the great things he had planned to do, how he'd make his name famous throughout the cattle country.

He grinned up at his partner. "We got ourselves our own land," he said slowly. "An' we've had almost half a life-time of struggle to get it and keep it. Even now, if things don't break right, we'll have to fight again for it. But it's worth the battle. Maybe that's just where all the fun is, anyhow, Hank—in that, an' knowin' that you've done your damndest and haven't been bluffed or licked."

And, had he known it, perhaps Abel Martin voiced in those homely words the secret of the men and women who made the West what it is today—the pioneers whose glorious stories and steadfast unswerving spirit we again pledge ourselves to bring you each month.

—THE EDITORS



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North up the trail from Dodge, Bowie Bill Harney and his tomboy granddaughter rode the dust of their longhorn herd—straight into the blood-reddened net of wilderness doom. For Ross Lambert, their top-string drag-man, had sealed his bargain with the Ogalalla cattle pirates. And he must carry it through to its deadly end—lest he betray a trust more precious even than a woman's love or the faith of a cowboy's boss. . . . Don't miss this powerful, novel-length drama of Old West trail-drivers, in the March issue of *Ace-High*—

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THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

Shoot First—And Live Longest!

FROM the booming gold camps of the Little Rockies to the dust-churned cattle trails, the name of Wild Bill Duff, free-lance lawman, was known, hated and feared. There was no doubt, either in the minds of the renegades or the harrassed townsmen he championed, but what Wild Bill was a natural killer. It was his boast that he never took a prisoner.

Bill Duff knew that, in a sense, he was damned by his miraculous gun-speed. He knew that most people—even the honest townsmen and the men and women he was hired to protect—disliked him. He knew that no man who followed that grim code of shoot first could ever afford to have friends, ever know the simple pleasures of a home, a bright fireside, or an evening's friendly talk with neighbors. . . .

On the sixteenth of October, 1885, Bill Duff, who was just starting out to clean up the surging, raucous town of Smoky Springs, dropped from sight. He left behind him the dead body of a deputy, shot squarely between the eyes. It was taken forgranted that Duff's bullet must have done for the man, after it had been found that the deputy had been playing in with the renegades who were trying to gain a foothold in town.

A year rolled by, then seven months more. In Smoky Springs, Hell's Half Acre was booming; the little trail town was still prey to the case-hardened trail hands and renegades who made it their headquarters. . . .

The paunchy, bearded stranger rode into town just at siesta time one lazy Spring afternoon when no one was on the sun-drenched dusty street. Wearily he dismounted before the empty door of the Trailman's Rest.

It was not strange, perhaps, that the quartette of men whose ponies drowsed before the bank should come to life just at that time. From the shadowed sides of buildings, they strode, suddenly alert. One man stayed outside with the horses; the other three, hastily snaking black neckerchiefs over their faces, stalked inside the bank, their guns out. Yet before the backs of the robbers had disappeared into the dark recesses, the bearded gent was running across the street. He paused long enough to bring his gun barrel down on the head of the astounded outside guard, and then he whirled, flattening himself outside the doorway, his gun raised.

There was the sound of shots as the bandits rushed for the door. The first man dropped when the bony fist of the stranger connected with his chin. The second fell when a gun-barrel slapped him on the temple. And the third let go the bulging gunnysack with a swift *whoosh* of breath as a .45 muzzle jutted into his stomach.

By this time the tumult brought half a dozen sleepy-eyed gents to the street—but their eyes popped open at sight of this one grizzled newcomer swiftly taking diamond hitches about the stilled forms of the bank-robbers.

Later, in the quiet of his office, the mayor looked hard at the stranger. "By golly," he said, "you're almost a dead ringer for Wild Bill Duff who started out to law this town. If these men had been killed instead of trussed up, I'd almost swear you was Wild Bill himself!"

"An' you'd be right, Mayor," said Wild Bill Duff, grinning. "When I left here for Mexico, I was plumb scared of my own gunswift. I never did mean to shoot that deputy right at that time. It made me think that there was such a thing as bein' too damn good with a gun. I hung around Mexico, never wantin' to kill another man. But—well, I kept feelin' plumb naked without a star on my shirt-front so I come back, aimin' to ask you if I couldn't finish the job I started. I may be a born lawman, but damned if I'm a born killer! If you want to try me out some more—?"

The mayor grinned as he held out his hand. And in his eyes was something which Wild Bill Duff—whose guns had been feared from the Little Rockies to the Texas end of the cattle trails—had been searching for most of his life: The light of true friendship!

—TRAIL RIDER

Rawhide, Gunsmoke—

The Rumbling T men bore down upon Duke, shooting as they came. . . .

By WALT COBURN

A white-faced kid with a vigilante rope about his neck was the bait which drew Duke Loveless, hard-bitten Long X trail boss, into roaring San Saba. . . . To mark himself, his trail-hands and his two thousand head of wet cattle for a midnight massacre among the lonely brakes of Cow Gap

and Texas Cattle!

Feature-length novel of the thundering cattle-trail

CHAPTER ONE

Whang-Leather Trail Boss

CATTLEMEN, from the Rio up to Milk River country said that old Zack Starr could put plenty of tallow on the ribs of his steers when he took a trail herd north. That meant he was a good beef man and a top trail boss. Not even old Zack's enemies ever denied that quality in the lanky Texan, who branded the big five-pointed star on the left ribs of his steers, covering a critter's side like a billboard sign.

By the same token, it was mostly Zack Starr's enemies who claimed that his steers multiplied like jackrabbits on the long trail. They also said that his longhorn steers had calves, and by the time Zack's trail herd reached its destination—Pueblo, Colorado; Cheyenne, Wyoming; or Miles City, Montana, depending on which one of the trails north he followed—those calves were grown steers. Steers that brought top prices, at that.

Not all the men who started with him from Matamoros, on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, ever reached the northern destination of the trail herd they drove. Instead, many of them either quit because they weren't tough enough to take Zack's orders, or they filled graves along the trail. It was well known that only tough hands ever hired out to the Star outfit, and of those, only the toughest survived. Zack Starr paid fighting wages, and he saw to it that his cowhands earned every dollar he paid them.

Zack Starr pulled out of Matamoros with one thousand head of longhorn cattle in the Star brand and another thousand head that wore a motley variety of Mexican brands. The latter were put in Zack's road-iron, a Long X on the left thigh. Which, after all, was appropriate because Zack Starr bragged that he could neither read nor write, and he signed his name with an X.

Two thousand head of cattle, therefore, left Matamoros in the Long X road-iron. With the outfit was a remuda of three hundred head of horses and fifty head of Spanish mules, a mess wagon and bed wagon, each drawn by four mules, and twenty-five top cowhands, Texans all, who had worked with Zack gathering cattle in Old Mexico. And Duke Loveless. Duke was Zack's nephew and ramrod of the outfit, running the spread whenever old Zack was away.

The trail herd crossed the Nueces River about one hundred and fifty miles north of Matamoros. Zack Starr and Duke Loveless got a fair count on the steers as they forded the river.

"Tally two-fifty-one," called Duke Loveless. "I got thirty-two ca'tridges in my hat and a tally of fifty-one in my head. Twenty-two-hundred and fifty-one head in the Long X road iron, Zack."

"Learn to count," growled the little round-shouldered, white-maned, whiskered cowman, his blue eyes like sparks under shaggy brows. "What in hell do they learn you young boneheads at college if you can't even keep a proper tally. There's twenty two hundred and fifty head of cattle in the herd that jest crossed. I'd bet with you, only I'd be bettin' ag'in my own damn money.

"All you got, I give you, from you socks to that high-toned education. And by Gawdamighty, you can't even count! Fifty one, hell! It's fifty even, and stays thataway. If you want beef for your belly, round up a stray and kill it. You ain't eatin' no Star beef on this trip. Only time I was ever sick in my sixty-seven years was once when I et some meat from a Star beef that was killed by mistake. If you cowhands want to use somethin' besides frijole beanses and bread to git the wrinkles outa your bellies, butcher a stray!

"We gained two hundred and fifty head between the Nueces and back yonder on the Rio Grande, and we shoulda done better. What in hell am I payin' you for? Between here and the Peg Leg Crossin' on the San Saba is a strip of country where the cattle roams a-plenty. We'll be takin' this herd up acrost that cow country. You men all pack runnin' irons. Try heatin' 'em now and then in a brandin' fire. When I was your age I made a hand. I didn't suck the hind tit and sponge off no rich uncle. I didn't have nobody to pick me up when I got knocked down. I killed my first Mexican before I'd got my second teeth. The good old stock's bred

outa you young whelps. No guts. No warp in yuh. Hell, you can't even count!"

THAT was old Zack Starr's way. Men hated him as they feared him. He stood hardly five feet six in his sock feet and weighed a hundred and fifty pounds without his cartridge belt and six-shooter. Not an ounce was fat. Despite his years he was quick moving, hard muscled, and active. It was the boast of Zack Starr that he had never been licked. Men had fist-whipped him, beaten him unconscious, but they had neglected to kill him—thereby making their last mistake on earth. Zack Starr had the unpleasant habit of finishing his fights with a gun. And he never shot to miss. Regarding the fairness of those gun fights which he never lost, much was said. Zack Starr never fought to lose. And if his methods were questionable, then he pointed out to Duke Loveless, how about the methods of a six footer, weighing two hundred pounds, beating a much smaller man to a pulp.

"No man's licked till he's dead," he told his nephew. "And if you have to settle a grudge with a man who is a faster, better shot, set back and wait till the sign is right. Git the bulge on him. Kill him off as quick as you know how. That orter be simple enough for even a damn college-learned dude to savvy."

Zack Starr had sent his orphaned nephew Duke Loveless to school at Austin, giving him a high school education and a few months at the little Texas University. Then he'd needed Duke and had yanked him out of school and sent him up the trail with a herd of longhorns. Duke had never returned to college.

Duke, nearly thirty now, tall, handsome and black-haired, was as good a bronc rider and cowhand as ever owned a rope and saddle. A range dude in his manner of dress, he appeared quite in contrast to old Zack, who wore his clothes and hats and boots until they were ragged and useless, despite the fact that he was one of the biggest cattlemen in south Texas.

Duke took old Zack's cussing as a part of his day's job. If he hated his uncle for the hard names old Zack called him, no man ever knew it from anything Duke Loveless said or did. He was intensely loyal to the hard-bitten little old cowman.

"If you ain't hung or shot," Zack Starr told Duke often enough, "you'll own the Star brand and all that goes with it when I kick the bucket. But don't count on me a-dyin' off. I've out-lived a whole damn army of men that figgered to tromp on my grave."

The trail herd tallied twenty-seven hundred head when they crossed the San Saba at the Peg Leg Crossing. Duke Loveless sat his horse, one leg thrown across the saddle horn. He took the cartridges he'd used as tally markers from his hat and shoved them, one by one, back into their loops in his cartridge belt.

"Twenty seven hundred, even, Zack."

"We'll tally three thousand at Doan's Crossin' on the Red," said Zack Starr. "We'll have our herd then. One thousand head in the Star iron. One thousand we gathered in Mexico. One thousand head picked up along the trail. That makes our trail herd, Duke."

"We're short handed," said Duke, carefully adjusting a bandage that covered a bullet tear in his cheek. "We buried four boys since we left the Nueces. Two more lost their nerve and coyoted on us last night. We've stole seven hundred head of cattle since we left Matamoros. We're bein' trailed right now by a pack of hard losers. You've got away with it before, Zack, but I got a notion they ain't lettin' you cut 'er this trip. I cut for sign of those two men that run out last night. I picked up their tracks. They've gone on north, headed for San Angelo."

"Then you should have knowed better than to hire quitters," Zack snorted. "Let 'em go to hell. We'll hire more men at

San Angelo—men that won't run out!"

"If we ever reach there."

"Meanin' what? Talk plain. None of that smart-Aleck college lingo."

"Those two hombres will carry the news that we're comin' up the trail with another Star herd in the X road-iron. There's men in this part of Texas that have lost cattle that's gone to Cheyenne and Miles City in the Long X road iron. What's to keep 'em from poolin' together and takin' this herd away from you when we git about as far as Cow Gap, this side of San Angelo. I cussed out the two men that turned rabbit last night, when they weakened at that last fight we had with some men back along the trail. I taken one of 'em to a fist whippin'. They'll cuss the Star outfit when they git drunk at San Angelo. They'll throw in with the tough hands that will make a try at stealin' your herd."

"You gittin' scared, Duke? Spooky?"

"Cautious. You know how easy I scare."

"Gawd hates a coward," said old Zack Starr, repeating one of his pet adages. "Duke, did you ever see me fight a horse?"

"No, sir," said Duke, repeating his part of an oft-recited ritual.

"Ever see me mistreat a woman?"

"No, sir," Duke Loveless replied patiently.

"And who claims them cattle we pick up along the trail now and then? Who claims them steers we bin puttin' in the Long X road iron?"

"Rustlers, Zack."

THE little old cowman's eyes sparkled.

"Your damn' right they're rustlers. They're two-legged, long-rope swingin' buzzards that's made a fat livin' a-whittlin' on every trail herd goin' north. Every herd but mine has bin raided by them night-ridin' sons, but I beat 'em to it. I carry along a picked crew of cowhands that will out-ride 'em and out-fight 'em. I never stole so much as a pod-bellied mammyless calf from an honest cowman. I steal from the damned rustlers that hang along the cattle trails. The honest cowman along the trail—big, little and middle-sized fellers—never lost a head of stock to Zack Starr. Let them curly wolves gather, Duke. Let 'em tackle us. We'll give 'em cards and spades and lick the socks off 'em!"

"Not short-handed as we are now, we can't, Zack."

"First time I ever heard you count the odds ag'in' you," said old Zack, his puckered blue eyes staring at his nephew. "You can't tally cattle worth a damn, but you kin multiply a few head of gutless rustlers till they number a corral full. What's eatin' on you, Duke?"

"The gambler's law of averages," said Duke Loveless, twisting the ends of the drooping moustache he'd grown since leaving Matamoros, "We've taken five herds up the trail. Got 'em all to the end of the trail without losin' too many men, and with more cattle than we started with. This time they're layin' for us. We need a full crew when we leave the San Saba behind us."

"Git more men, then. Ride up the river to Menard to-night. Pick up five-six men. I'll go along. I kin size men up better than you."

"I had that notion in mind," smiled Duke, his white teeth showing.

"I figgered that was what you was leadin' up to, in your college-learned way. Seems like the last time you painted Menard red, there was a buckskin haired gal that caused you some trouble."

"More sorrel than buckskin," Duke corrected the little old cowman. "Dark chestnut sorrel. Her eyes matched."

"You shot her brother because he wouldn't let you kiss her on the dance floor. Or was it her old man you killed?"

"Shows what happens to real facts

when they get told to the boss by a bunch of jealous, whiskey lovin' cowhands," grinned Duke. "You stayed at camp and missed the dance. It was her cousin, not her brother, that I had to shoot. I didn't kill him. He went for his gun and I broke his arm with a bullet. I wasn't kissin' the girl. Just waltzin' with her when he got loco from bad whiskey and made a damn fool play on the dance floor. I don't even know her name. There was a dance goin' on and she was the prettiest girl there—or anywhere else I've ever bin. I danced with her three times, hand-runnin'. We were just gettin' acquainted when that gent cut across the floor. He was on the prod.

" 'It's my cousin, Charlie,' she told me. 'Charlie Tolliver. Get away quick or he'll kill you!'

"But," grinned Duke Loveless, "I didn't have on my runnin' shoes. I busted his arm as he come out with his gun. Gathered the boys and high-tailed it for camp. That's the last I ever saw of the girl."

"And now you're r'arin' to ride up the river to Menard and ask her to dance *Home, Sweet Home*. Hell, if I reckon to git ary new hands at Menard, I better go along. While you're swingin' her around the dance floor and shootin' the vest buttons off her kin-folks, I'll hire what cowhands there is to be had. Some day, mebby, I'll find out what you learned at school besides how to git into jackpots. . . . Charlie Tolliver, eh? You should have shot him in the belly instead of jest slappin' his wrist with a bullet. I was talkin' to two-three trail bosses who had bin up the trail and back the last year. They lost cattle between the San Saba and the Red River to rustlers that called their boss Charlie Tolliver. Mebby you've heard?"

Duke Loveless nodded, grinning faintly. "I'll try to do better by you next time I cut the gent's trail, Zack."

"Do so."

They rode to camp. Duke bathed and shaved and had the cook trim his crisp black hair.

"Shavin' off that hair on your lip?" asked the cook.

"She likes a moustache on a man," grinned Duke, eyeing himself in the cracked mirror that was propped against a sugar can on the mess wagon table. "No soup strainer like you wear. Somethin' neat and sportin' lookin'. Dangerous and darin'. Like the one her cousin Charlie Tolliver was a-wearin'."

Zack Starr snorted either with disgust or concealed pride. Yet even old Zack grudgingly admitted to himself that Duke Loveless cut a handsome figure as he straightened up, white teeth showing in a grin. Wide shouldered, trim waisted, he stood an inch over six feet and his hundred and eighty five pounds was hard, lithe muscle. He dressed in the height of

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cowboy fashion of that time, with California wool pants foxed with buckskin, a double breasted blue flannel shirt with pearl buttons the size of a half dollar, a black silk neckscarf. A pair of new, hand made boots, a black hat. His filled cartridge belt slanted across his lean flanks. The holster of his gun was tied low on his thigh.

WOMEN made fools of themselves, sometimes, over Duke Loveless. He had much the same way with women as he had with horses, Zack claimed, cutting as handsome a figure on the dance floor as he did in the saddle. But mostly, Duke treated women lightly and carelessly. Now and then he paid bold, swift homage to some girl whose type of beauty caught his fancy, and he rode away with a wave of his hand in a swift-moving dust cloud that marked his departure for some new range, some new adventure. There were no lies nor subterfuge to stain the love-making of Duke Loveless. He neither gave nor asked for love, save that swift, impetuous infatuation of the moment that faded with the starlight and died at dawn. Women were fascinated by his ruthlessness; many men hated and condemned him for it. And Duke Loveless treated the hatred of his enemies as carelessly as he accepted the flattery of beautiful women.

Duke Loveless wore no vainglorious notches on his gun to mark his gun victories, and no man had ever heard him speak ill of a woman or boast of his love conquests. He had killed a man once for speaking some slurring remark about a dance hall girl at Dodge City. He treated the women of the frontier dance halls with the same courtesy that he bestowed upon the wife or daughter or mother of the local parson. Nor was it any part of affectation on his part. No man was quicker to defend womanhood with fists or gun. Duke lived according to his own bold, reckless code. No love had nicked his heart; no notches decorated his ivory handled gun.

Duke Loveless was not admitting, even to himself, that the coppery-haired girl he had danced with a year ago at Menard counted for anything in his heart. Yet he had grown a moustache because, a year ago, that same girl had made some laughing, teasing remark about his youthful appearance, his clean shaven upper lip.

Zack Starr and several of the Star cowhands who were going to town were still eating supper when Duke saddled his horse and hit the trail for Menard. He had a habit of riding alone, despite old Zack's prediction that some time Duke would be bushwhacked.

"A man's time to die," Duke had repeated more than once, "comes when it comes, regardless!"

CHAPTER TWO

Hangnoose Rescue

DARKNESS had settled when Duke Loveless rode into the little cow town of Menard on the San Saba River. Lights showed in the saloons along the dusty street. Saddled horses stood at the hitchracks. Duke reined up at the largest saloon and dismounted. He counted five horses at the hitchrack. He had never seen any of the horses before. And part of a good cowhand's training is to remember horses as he'd remember a man's face. The doors of the saloon yawned open, inviting the thirsty. Through the open doorway Duke studied the dozen or more men who lined the bar. All of them were cowpunchers, and by the dust on their clothes, the stubble of whiskers on their faces, and the carelessness of their garb, the men were not in town to celebrate.

Duke had noticed that the doors of the town hall were closed and the windows dark. There would be no dance there tonight. These cowhands were in Menard for another purpose that had nothing to

do with dancing or getting drunk or gambling. The poker tables at the far end of the saloon were empty save for a glum looking tinhorn who sat at one table playing solitaire.

Charlie Tolliver was not in the crowd that lined the bar. The men inside were all strangers to Duke Loveless, so he stood back in the shadow, his hand near his gun, watching and listening. There was something about that group of men that puzzled the Star ramrod. They were holding their drinks in their hands, listening intently to what a tall, rawboned man with reddish hair was saying. The man, bottle in one hand, empty whiskey glass in the other, was talking in a low-pitched, rasping voice.

"The big 'un got away again, but we got the little 'un. There's the cottonwood tree at the river crossin'. We'll leave the little 'un hangin' there fer the big 'un to find when he shows up again at Menard. That young son is a hard case. He's old enough to make a hand at rustlin' or bushwhackin'. He's one of the gang, even if he is a bald-faced kid. He put up a hell of a scrap before we got 'im hogtied. There's plenty wolf blood in him. The orders says string him up. Drink up, men, and we'll git 'er over."

"Hell, Marlin," said one of the men, "he's just a button. He ain't hardly eighteen. Stringin' up a man is one thing, but hangin' a button that ain't come of a votin' age yet don't set good with me. Let's not do somethin' we'd be plumb ashamed of after we cooled off. The kid's a rustler, but somehow, hangin' him don't seem right!"

"He shot two of our men bad enough to lay 'em up for weeks. He kin shoot as good as a man and we ketched him red-handed. You all agreed when you voted me sheriff that you'd take my orders. I don't like a quitter that backs out in a tight. You're into this. Every man in this saloon is into it."

The red-faced saloonman behind the bar nodded heavily. The lone tinhorn gambler flipped the last card in his hand on the table and looked up with a thin smile.

"The Vigilantes of San Saba," he said flatly, getting to his feet. "Ed Marlin's right. Young Tolliver belongs on the noose-end of a rope, for Charlie Tolliver to see when he leads his wolf pack back to Menard. Where have you got the kid hid out, Marlin?"

"Across the river at the old corral. A couple of the boys standin' guard on him. I got men scattered in the saloons along the street to keep me posted if any of the Tolliver outfit show up. We give 'em a hell of a chase last night. We scattered the gang, killed two of 'em and captured the kid. The Tollivers has friends in town, so we got to act fast. Fer the good looks of the thing, Deacon, we kin hold a sort of trial acrost the river at the corral. Make the hangin' legal. Fetch your Bible."

That was when Duke stepped outside, mounted his horse and rode quietly away. He didn't know Ed Marlin and the other grim looking members of the self-styled vigilantes, but he did know the gambler Deacon Smith by reputation.

The frock-coated tinhorn was a killer as well as a card sharp. He was known up and down the cattle trails for his peculiar and grisly habit of reading a Bible text and preaching a flowery sermon at the open grave of his gun victims. Once an ordained minister, years ago, he had been unfrocked. Marshal Wyatt Earp had run him out of Tombstone, even as Bat Masterson, the law at Dodge City, had told Deacon Smith never to show up again there under penalty of death. Not that they objected to his killings or his funeral sermons which were popular frontier classics. But the black-garbed gambler was a tinhorn crook who practiced his card tricks on gullible cowhands and honest citizens who loved a poker game.

DUKE forded the San Saba at its wagon trail crossing. He rode boldly towards the big pole corral a few hundred yards up the river. He had been there before and knew the ground. Whistling carelessly he approached the corral that showed in the moonlight.

Two men with guns in their hands stepped from the shadows. One of them barked a challenge.

"Stand your hand, mister! Who are you and what are you after?"

Duke Loveless quit whistling. He let his horse keep on at a running walk until he was halted between the two men on the ground. Their guns covered him. Duke grinned down at the man who had called out the challenge.

"I come after young Tolliver. I don't want trouble but you'll get it if you don't turn him over to me." Duke's grin widened.

"Well, I'll be damned!" gasped the man. "Are you drunk, mister, or plain loco? Who in hell do you think you are? Take to him, Shorty. He means—"

Duke quit his saddle with a leap that landed him on top of the man's head and shoulders. The barrel of his gun thudded down on the fellow's head. Duke's horse had jumped forward as the other man made a rush. Duke, crouched, dove at the man's legs and upset him. The man's gun exploded with a bang, then Duke knocked him cold with a hard, short swing of his pistol barrel. Both men were out cold.

It took Duke but a few moments to cut the ropes that bound the arms and legs of young Tolliver who lay on the ground alongside the corral. He jerked the boy to his feet and propelled him towards the three saddle horses standing nearby. Then he swung aboard his own horse.

The Tolliver boy had mounted. Duke motioned him. "Come on, button. Your necktie party will be showin' up directly. Come along."

Not until they had put a mile or more between them and the corral, did Duke slack the speed of his running horse and take a look at the youngster.

The boy's face and straw colored hair were matted with dried blood. His clothes were torn and blood-spattered. He grinned gamely. "I'm obliged, mister, whoever you are. They was goin' to string me up."

"Hurt bad?"

"Skinned up some, that's all. They taken it out on me when Charlie got away. You see, I'd pulled a Injun trick on 'em. Hazed a bunch of horses off, makin' sign that they'd pick up and foller, thinkin' they was trailin' Charlie and the others. I tricked Marlin plenty. Charlie and the others got away. Marlin ketched me by accident or I'd be with Charlie and the boys right now—"

"This Charlie Tolliver must be a shore brave hombre," said Duke. "Lettin' a button like you to take the big risk while him and his men played coyote."

"Charlie Tolliver ain't no coyote, mister!" flared the boy hotly. "He didn't know what I done. Charlie didn't know I was away from the ranch last night. I run off, see? I'd heard Charlie and the boys talkin' about makin' a raid on the Star trail herd that's comin'. When they rode off, I cold-trailed 'em. I was follerin' a long ways behind when Marlin' and some men come foggin' along in the night. I knowed it was Marlin because he was talkin' big when he rode with his posse past the brush where I hid. They was trailin' Charlie.

"I trailed Marlin. I knowed about where the Star herd would be bedded down. I knowed how Marlin' was ridin' to cut Charlie's sign. I rode around, picked up that bunch of broom-tails and hazed 'em along. I headed Marlin and his men off, shootin' off my six-shooter and saddle gun in the dark, makin' 'er sound like they was ambushed. Then I led 'em

off in the night with that bunch of broomtails kickin' up dust and leavin' tracks and plumb foolin' Marlin' in the dark. But they surrounded me before I could make a getaway. And that fool Marlin shootin' at him, last night. . . . Say, who you, mister? You must be new with the outfit."

"You say Charlie Tolliver figures on raidin' the Star herd?"

"Tonight about midnight, but Marlin' hornin' in like he did spoiled the plan. Charlie don't know that Marlin was trailin' him. He don't know about 'em grabbin' me. And for all Charlie knows I taken that note yesterday to Duke Loveless at the Star outfit."

"What note, button?"

"If you don't know," said the boy warily, "I shore ain't tellin'. I've talked a heap a'ready. Who are you?"

"Did Marlin get hold of that note?"

"Not by a darn sight. I got it here in my boot. —"

"Let's have it, button."

"Huh?"

"The note for Duke Loveless."

Suspicion, then alarm showed on the boy's battered face. He pulled up sharply. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"I'm Duke Loveless, button. Let's have a look at that note you got for me."

THE boy whirled his horse, raking the animal with his spurs. But Duke acted too fast. He jerked the boy from the saddle with a long sweep of his arm, swung from the saddle and sat straddle of the fighting youth who put up a furious but brief and futile fight. He jerked the boy's arms behind his back and tied them. Then yanked off both the boy's boots. One of them had a folded note shoved in the lining at the top. He shoved the note in his pocket and grinned down at the boy who lay panting on the ground.

"Marlin and his men will be pickin' up our trail, young 'un. You had better string your bets with me. Will you behave if I untie your hands and let you back on your horse?"

"Yes. Unless I git a chance to kill you."

"I saved you from hangin', button. You owe me somethin'. Or is there any such thing as honor among you Tollivers?"

"I hear 'em comin' now," said the boy, scrambling to his feet, his hands tied behind him. "Mister, untie my hands. Give me a gun and I'll fight 'em till—"

"Take 'er easy," Duke interrupted the boy. He could hear riders coming along the river trail from the direction of the Star camp at Peg Leg Crossing. That would be Zack and some of his cowpunchers headed for town.

"I got you into this, mister," said the young cowboy. "You got no business quarrelin' with Sheriff Marlin. You bet I got what you call honor and I'll square my debt to you as quick as I kin. They're a-comin'. Either gimme a gun and let me side you in the fight, or let's git away from here while the goin's good."

Duke untied the young cowpuncher's hands, motioned to him to get on his horse.

"What's your name, button?"

"Tug Tolliver. I'm Charlie's—"

"Yeah. Never mind the family history. That's some of the Star outfit comin' so tuck in your shirt tail. Think you kin locate Charlie Tolliver?"

"I ain't leadin' you to Charlie's hideout. Even if you did save my neck, I won't double-cross Charlie. You kin beat me till—"

"Dry up, yearlin'. You give up more head than a calf at a brandin' fire. You rattle your hocks, Tug. Take Charlie Tolliver this message. Tell him that we're killin' him or any of his outfit that bothers a hoof of cattle in the Long X road iron. Tell him that the next time I shoot at him, I won't be just funnin' with him. Now drag it, you young warthog!"

Duke, mounted again, brought his quirt down along the rump of young Tug Tolliver's horse. The horse jumped and bolted, carrying the young cowboy out of sight.

Duke Loveless rode towards the main trail and hailed Zack and several of his cowhands.

Old Zack recognized him and took his hand from the butt of his gun. "Poppin' outa the brush like a damn road-agent," he growled at his nephew. "What's the idee?"

"Charlie Tolliver and his tough hands aim to stampede the Star herd tonight about third guard time. Unless Ed Marlin and his vigilantes cut Tolliver off between now and then."

"Who is Ed Marlin?"

"Sheriff of Menard. Sounds like him and his outfit comin' this direction. Listen, Zack. Listen to what I say, boys. I've bin with you since we left camp. Here, one of you men swap hats with me. . . . Let's have that coat you're wearin', Tex. . . . Swap horses with me, Luke. I want that gray you're ridin'. And don't nobody call me Duke or let on who I am."

"What hell you bin raisin' now?" growled old Zack as Duke mounted the gray horse and swapped his new black hat for an old gray one.

"I'll let Marlin tell it," grinned Duke. "Or Deacon Smith."

"Deacon Smith?" echoed Zack. "What's that no-good, gun-slingin' son got to do with it?"

MARLIN and his men pulled up, drawn guns in their hands. The Menard sheriff was seething with anger that showed on his face and the harshness of his voice.

"Who are you, men? Where do you think you're goin, anyhow?"

"My name is my own, mister," snapped old Zack, his short temper roused, "Where are we goin'? We'll be goin' to your funeral, you red-muzzled jasper, if you don't quit wavin' that smoke-pole in my face. I was ridin' the free range before you was weaned off a pair of floursack pants and a hunk of sugar cane."

"Hell, Ed, don't cross 'im," Deacon Smith rode between them. "That's Zack Starr."

Sheriff Marlin muttered something in his red moustache and shoved his gun slowly back in its holster.

"We're hunting for some of the Tolliver outfit," said Deacon Smith. "You remember me, Zack?"

"Plenty," snapped old Zack. "You taken me for two thousand dollars in a poker game at San Antone six years ago."

"Better luck next time," smiled the gambler. "This is Ed Marlin, Sheriff of Menard. He and his vigilantes had young Tolliver tied up at the corral across the river from town. One of Charlie Tolliver's outfit cracked the skulls of the two guards and rescued the kid. The guards didn't know the man who jumped 'em."

"He had on a black hat like that feller is wearin'," said one of the posse whose head was swathed in a crude bandage. "But that ain't the man. He was ridin' a big black geldin' that's a dead ringer for the horse that other feller yonder is a-forkin'. The fightin'est fool I ever seen. He taken us off our guard and like to killed us. I shot at him once. I'm plumb certain I hit 'im. He got away with young Tug Tolliver—"

"Save the details for the bartender," said Deacon Smith drily. "Young Tolliver and his rescuer were headed this way."

"We ain't seen hide ner hair of ary Tolliver," growled Zack. "Us boys just come from camp. I was headin' for Menard to hire me some cowhands. I'm short handed."

"Take your pick of these men, Zack," smiled the gambler thinly. "They're all the men you'll find at Menard. They're top cowhands and they'll fight—"

Old Zack Starr eyed the group of perhaps a dozen riders, his puckered blue eyes scrutinizing them closely.

"I wouldn't give a Mexican dobe dollar for a corral full of 'em," he snorted. "Let's go back to camp, boys."

Old Zack Starr turned his horse and started back down the river trail, his men following him. Duke, astride the big gray horse, sitting his saddle with his weight in his left stirrup, grinned faintly at Deacon Smith and the scowling sheriff.

"Zack," he said pleasantly to the tinhorn and the irate law officer, "don't seem to cotton to your pool-room cowboys. Did I hear you say they were fightin' men, Deacon? They sure did show their bravery when they rounded up a bald faced kid to hang. The vigilantes of the San Saba! The pack of you had better stick together, for that Tolliver button might jump you out and run you outa the country if you didn't travel in packs. Well, vigilantes of the San Saba, happy huntin'!"

As Duke swung his horse around and caught up with Zack, the man with the bandaged head pointed after him. "That shore talks fer all the world like the damned snake that busted my head with a gun barrel!"

"Why didn't you tell him so?" smiled Deacon Smith.

"I—I wasn't plumb certain before, but now I'm sure as hell! Ed, that's him all right."

"It don't make good sense," growled the sheriff. "Zack Starr, eh? The damned ol' goat whiskered cow-thief! Talkin' to the law thataway."

"You didn't have to take it, Marlin," Deacon Smith reminded him.

"Called you men a lot of pool-room bums," the sheriff went on.

"That would be Duke Loveless who so aptly described your viligantes, Marlin—the notorious Duke Loveless, Zack Starr's gun-fighting nephew, and heir to the Star iron. One of these days I'll hang his handsome hide on the corral."

"Nobody was holdin' *your* gun-hand," snapped Sheriff Marlin, jumping at the chance to get back at the suave-tongued tinhorn.

"I wasn't holding aces, Marlin." Deacon Smith's sallow skin took on a faint color. "I don't play losing hands. I didn't hold openers in this jackpot. I'm playing this game close to my belly, Marlin. Waiting until I've had a look at the cards some of the others are holding. It's a sweet jackpot. Sit back, Marlin, and watch the other players bet. Charlie Tolliver, for instance. Duke Loveless and Zack Starr. They'll all tip their hands enough so that I'll get a peek at their cards." The tinhorn smiled faintly, his pale eyes lighting. Then his tone changed.

"From here on, Marlin, I'll give all orders. No more failures like you made when you went out after Charlie Tolliver and came back with a half-baked kid. Zack Starr was right. The pack of you ain't worth a dobe dollar! Get on back to town. I'm sitting in the game from here on. I'm after that trail herd. And what I go after, I get."

"Meanin' just what, Deacon?" growled Marlin.

"I had you elected sheriff just for a joke, Marlin. And to give myself legal protection. I sent you out to blot out Charlie Tolliver. You made a mess of it. You and this pack of would-be tough hands. Now I'm taking personal charge of the vigilantes. I'll kill the first man that shows yellow, understand? We're sitting back right now. We'll let Charlie Tolliver and Duke Loveless scrap it out. The Tolliver outfit and the Star spread will lose men in the fight, and the more they lose, the better. If Charlie Tolliver gets killed, that bunch of kin-folk trail hands of his will lay down their guns. Marlin can round 'em up and hang 'em or do as he damn pleases with 'em. The Star outfit

will be weakened. We'll pick a night when the sign is right and blot 'em out. If Duke Loveless and Charlie Tolliver could be ribbed into fighting a gun-duel, the law could arrest the winner and hang him for murder, or Marlin, you might arrest Zack Starr for cattle rustling. There are several ways to place our bets. Rake in the Star outfit as the jackpot. Let's get back to Menard and play possum till Charlie Tolliver and Duke Loveless settle the fight that was started a year ago when Duke danced too often with Charlie's red-headed cousin, Charlotte. . . ."

Deacon Smith's voice slurred softly over the girl's name. His pale gray eyes glittered and he smiled to himself as he headed back in the direction of Menard.

CHAPTER THREE

Bait for a Midnight Gun-Trap!

BACK at the Starr camp on the north bank of the Peg Leg Crossing on the San Saba, Duke Loveless, alone in the bed tent, read the note he had taken from young Tug Tolliver. It was written on paper that gave off a faint odor of rose sachet. The writing was that of a woman.

It began without formal introduction, without the mention of names:

> Have you forgotten your interrupted waltz with the girl you called Prairie Rose? Or the promise you made to come back some night to finish the dance?
>
> There will be no dance for the Star cowboys when they reach the San Saba, but there will be a full moon. And if you are as gallant a *caballero* as you would have a girl believe you to be, you may get a beautiful glimpse of the moon from a sycamore grove a few miles down the river. Midnight, I have read, is the romantic hour, when witches ride broomsticks and lovers pledge eternal vows. But it is also the hour when danger crouches in the shadows. So it would be safer if you burned this note and sang your love songs to a bedded trail herd.

It was a challenge. From what young Tug Tolliver had let slip, the note was meant to lead him away from the Star camp while Charlie Tolliver and his men raided the trail herd, and the note had been sent with Charlie Tolliver's knowledge. It was meant as bait to lure him into a gun trap.

The same intoxicating scent of wild roses that had filled his nostrils when he held her in his arms and danced with her now came from the note he held in his hand. Duke held the paper in the candle flame and watched it burn to white ashes.

Blowing out the candle, he joined Zack and the men who squatted on their hunkers in the mess tent, sipping coffee and eating a late supper of cold meat and bread. He reclaimed his black hat from the man from whom he'd borrowed the battered headgear, and shed the coat he'd worn to help complete his disguise.

It was an hour until midnight when third guard went on. Duke poured himself a cup of strong black coffee, cooled it with water and drank it down.

"Better put all the boys on guard, Zack," he suggested.

"Who you givin' orders to?" snapped old Zack. "I kin run this layout without ary help from you. You got us into enough fool trouble with chargin' around knockin' law-officers on the head. Who is this kid they was goin' to hang, anyhow?"

"Young Tug Tolliver. He's about sixteen-eighteen years old. Game young rooster. He told me that Charlie Tolliver aimed to raid the herd tonight about third guard time. Like you say, Zack, you're roddin' the outfit. It's no hair off my hide if you all bed down and make Charlie Tolliver a present of the Star herd and everthing in the Long X road-iron."

"Might as well give it to Tolliver as leave it to a college-learned dude when I kick the bucket. Better skin outa them fancy duds and git into workin' clothes. Or are you goin' girlin'?"

"Zack," grinned Duke Loveless, "there's times when you just naturally read a man's mind."

He dropped his empty cup in the dish-pan and left the mess tent, his silver mounted spurs jingling. The Star cow-punchers grinned after him. Old Zack swore softly into his white whiskers and blew on his coffee to cool it. They heard Duke mount his horse and ride away.

"Reckon the young idiot has gone back to town fer more trouble?" frowned the cook.

"With a gun fight promisin'?" snorted old Zack. "You talk like you'd bin hittin' the lemon extract flavorin' again."

But Duke Loveless was not riding out to the bedded herd. He was following a dim trail that led down the river to the sycamore grove about five miles distant.

"God hates a coward," he told himself, easing his six-shooter in its holster.

DUKE searched every bush and every shadow with his eyes as he rode along at a trot. He watched the ears of his horse for the slightest twitch that would tell him the animal had sighted or scented any hidden man on the trail ahead. As much as possible, he rode in the shadow, skirting the patches of moonlit clearing.

But nobody blocked his trail, nor did any shot come from the shadowed brush patches. It was as if he were riding only to keep a lover's tryst under the big, round yellow Texas moon.

Duke Loveless kept reminding himself that this was a trap he was riding into, and that the blot of shadow yonder along the river bank where a grove of tall sycamores grew, was dangerous. He kept telling himself that, after all, he was no callow, moonstruck youth to be ensnared by the scent of wild roses and clever words on paper.

And this girl, he remembered from a year ago, was no simple little country maid. She was in her twenties, poised and capable of holding her own. He'd learned that much during the few minutes he'd danced with her. Nor was she any brazen product of the frontier dance halls.

She had been a match for Duke Loveless, had challenged all that was in him and had mocked him in a subtle manner, provoking him with the slanting look of eyes. And when he had shot her half-drunken cousin in the arm, it was she who had prevented a wholesale gun-fight. She had, in fact, covered Duke's getaway by picking up Charlie Tolliver's six-shooter from the dance floor and standing there with it in her hand, whipping Charlie Tolliver's tipsy companions with words that lashed them into a sullen submission.

"Go back to the saloon where you belong," she'd told them. "You're acting like a pack of half-witted hoodlums. You, Charlie! If you were any part of a man you'd thank Duke Loveless for not killing you. If dad were alive he'd horsewhip a few of you for breaking up a decent dance. Go back to your whiskey bottles and take Charlie with you. Get a doctor to patch him up. Now clear out!"

There had been no womanish hysteria; no wailing or tears. That girl had stood there with a gun in her hand and cleared the dance hall of the drunken pack who had come there hunting trouble. Then she had turned to Duke. Her eyes were still blazing with anger. She'd smiled a little.

"You'd better go, mister. They'll come back, and they'll be shooting when they come."

"I'll take my men and go back to camp," Duke had told her. "I'll be comin' up the trail next year to claim the rest of this dance. You're aces, lady. I'd like to kiss you good-bye."

"And start a real gun fight? Consider yourself kissed, mister. Now get going."

"I'll be back," Duke had told her, "to claim all the waltzes the fiddler plays. And the kiss I can't take with me now. Adios."

That was the girl he was risking his hide to meet tonight. A girl with coppery lights in her dark hair and hazel-gray eyes that were unlike the eyes of any girl he had ever known. He did not know her given name, but she was a Tolliver. Because of the perfume of her hair he'd called her, teasingly, the Prairie Rose of the San Saba. And for some reason he'd never explained to himself, he had never asked who she was or anything about her.

Danger lurked there in the black shadows of the tall sycamores. If he were riding into a bushwhacker's trap, then he was doing the job in style. There was a strip of moonlit clearing to cross. He rode across it, softly whistling the Mexican waltz tune they had danced to a year ago. She had sung the words softly in his ear as they'd danced, the words of *Morir Soñado*—To Die Dreaming.

She rode out of the shadows of the sycamore grove to meet him. She was the first woman he'd ever seen riding astride, like a man, instead of using a side-saddle on the palamino buckskin horse with cream colored mane and tail.

DUKE'S heart quickened. As their horses met, he removed his hat. She pulled a gauntlet glove from her right hand and extended it in welcome. Duke took her hand, swung his horse against hers, leaned from the saddle and kissed her. She made no resistance. Her lips met his warmly. Then she reined her horse back out of his reach.

"You earned that, Duke Loveless," she told him, her voice flavored with the throaty huskiness he remembered so well.

"You pay your debts," he replied, trying keep his voice steady. No woman's kiss had ever made a complete fool of Duke Loveless, but he had to fight now for self-control.

In the moonlight, with the meeting spiced as it was with danger, this girl was lovelier than he had remembered her.

"You shouldn't have come here," she said.

"God hates a coward," Duke repeated one of old Zack's pet sayings.

"Bravery is one thing," she said, as he recaptured her hand. Foolhardiness is another."

"And the Prairie Rose of the San Saba," he said huskily, "makes a fool of any man, brave or coward."

He swung his big black gelding closer. His arms went around the girl hungrily. He hadn't noticed the quirt that swung from her wrist by a leather loop, but he felt the blinding sting of it across his eyes.

His arms dropped. The palamino shied sideways. Duke looked at the girl in blank astonishment. Her face was a shade white under its olive sun tan. Her eyes blazed.

"I'm no dance hall wench," she told him, her voice vibrant with anger, "to be mauled around. Nor am I any Mexican border señorita, giving her kisses to a *caballero* who loves her and rides away. And if you can't act like a man I'll be sorry I ever took the trouble to meet you here."

"Now that you'd led me into your trap," said Duke, angered by the slash of the heavy rawhide quirt, "let's have the fireworks. I've gotten the kiss that was my reward. Where's your drunken cousin Charlie and his outfit of cattle thieves? I'm fool enough to come here. Trot out your fightin' Tollivers. You're no dance hall wench, nor any Mexican señorita. What kind of a woman are you then? Bait for a bushwhacker trap!" Duke's six-shooter was in his hand. His voice steadied again.

"Ride into the shadows," he said, grabbing her wrist as he crowded his horse against hers. "Ride so that you'll be between me and the brush. I'll play your game, lady, till the chips are all tossed in the jackpot. Trot out your fightin' Tollivers!"

"I rode here alone and there isn't any

one hidden in the brush, mister. I'll go with you while you take a look behind every tree and bush. Do you think you'd be alive now if Charlie or any of the Tumbling T outfit was there to see you pawing me? They'd have shot you out of the saddle. You're safe from any of the Tumbling T Tollivers. And if you didn't know it, you're hurting my wrist." Cold contempt now was in her throaty voice and suddenly she made Duke feel like a woman beater. He released her wrist and rode with her towards the shadows of the tall sycamores along the river bank.

A sullen silence held Duke. Out of the tail of his eye he saw the girl rub her bruised wrist. Then she laughed. Not loudly, but deep in her throat. The color was back in her cheeks and her eyes were bright with mocking lights. She reached out and touched his drooping black moustache with the tip of her forefinger.

"It's real, isn't it? Did you grow it for me, Duke? Why, you're blushing like a schoolboy!" She rocked back and forth in her saddle, looking up at him from under her hatbrim, laughing at him.

DUKE had never before felt like a complete fool. This girl was hitting him in every vital spot. Baiting him, humiliating him, and now laughing at him. Then his anger gave way to a genuine grin.

"The Prairie Rose of the San Saba wins this pot," he said, holding out his hand. "Shake. I'll behave. From now on I'm as harmless as a sheepherder."

"But I don't like sheepherders," she told him, letting him keep hold of her hand as their horses stopped at the edge of the river. "Shall we sit on the bank of my San Saba and talk? There's so much I want to know about the notorious Duke Loveless who has no nicks in his heart and whittles no notches on his gun."

"Who told you that?" said Duke, letting go her hand and swinging to the ground.

"I made it up," she said, dismounting and sitting on a fallen tree trunk. "It's true, no?"

"It was, up till now. But you've made a dent in my pride and a man's pride is almighty close to his heart. You sure know how to make a man sit up and beg."

"Even if I have to use a quirt on 'em," nodded the girl. "I'm afraid you're going to have a black eye. I'm sorry. But you made me furious for a minute. I've an ugly temper."

"Quick-triggered, mebby. But nothin'

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about you could be ugly." He rubbed his injured eye that had caught the full force of the quirt and grinned faintly. "I had it comin', I reckon. But young Tug talked some before he knew who I was. And—"

"Tug thinks you're all the aces in the deck. He's rearing to hire out right now to the Star outfit."

"You've talked to him since I took the note from him?"

"Yes." Her mocking smile was gone. "You did something tonight that puts me forever in your debt, mister. Tug's my young brother. He's all I have in the world since my mother died and my father was killed. Marlin was going to hang that boy. He's a beast."

"I doubt if they would have actually hung the button. Deacon Smith would have stopped it, I reckon. You know Deacon Smith?"

"Very well—too well, in fact. And perhaps you're right. But you saved Tug, and you risked your life doing it. I love Tug mighty dearly. So you see, Duke, I've no right to refuse you anything."

"And I'd be lower than a tinhorn sport like Deacon Smith if I'd ask you to even let me hold your hand. So that's why you let me kiss you?" Duke's brows knit in a scowl.

"No. I let you kiss me because I wanted you to." Color tinted her cheeks now. Then she smiled a little confusedly. "This argument is getting us nowhere. You came here, didn't you, thinking my note was a trap, or that it was meant to get you away from the Star camp while Charlie and the boys stampeded your herd and ran off your cattle. Am I right?"

"Somethin' like that."

"Do Zack Starr and your men know you came here to meet me?"

"Certainly not. Zack's probably throwin' fits right now. I'd better get back before your cousin Charlie makes his raid."

"It's past midnight now. If Charlie and the Tumbling T boys were going to raid the Star herd, they'd be doing it right now and we'd be hearing the shooting. But they're not raiding your herd tonight or any other night, for that matter. They've gotten their orders to let the Star trail herd alone."

"Who gave 'em those orders?"

"Charlotte Tolliver."

"Charlie Tolliver?"

SHE spelled the name out slowly for him. "Charlotte. That's my name. You didn't know?"

"No. I'd always called you the Prairie Rose of the San Saba. Like a moonstruck poet.... Charlotte Tolliver—Charlie Tolliver. Say the names fast or careless and they sound alike."

"Yes." The girl was looking at him searchingly. Then she laughed softly and slipped her hand into his. "Let's talk about you, Duke. You don't need to lope back to camp. There'll be no cattle raiding tonight, I promise you. Tell me about this notorious Duke Loveless."

"I wish you'd quit hoorawin' me. I told you I was licked. About this note business. I'd like to get it straightened out in my mind."

"I wrote the note and gave it to Tug to deliver to you when the Star herd reached the Peg Leg Crossing. Charlie caught him with the note. Read it and gave it back to Tug. He told the youngster to deliver it as I'd told him to and say nothing to me about his having read it. Which orders from Charlie, Tug intended to obey. He thinks Cousin Charlie is a tin god on horseback. And he'd swallowed Charlie's own peculiar version about the shooting last year, along with the story of how our dad was killed five years ago at Matamoros. So—"

"Your dad was killed at Matamoros?" interrupted Duke.

"Yes. I don't want to talk about that—not now. Tug was going to help Charlie in his plan to trap you. Then you saved

Tug's life, which put the boy in debt to you. He paid that debt in part by coming to me with the whole story. I located Charlie and sent him and the Tumbling T men to their ranch. Then I rode here to meet you. And in spite of everything to warn you away from here, you came. You came alone to meet a girl whom you thought was leading you into a bush-whacker trap. That's why I kissed you. Because I wanted to. I'd kiss you again for the same reason."

"Now, Charlotte?"

"Right now, Duke."

The stars were growing pale in the sky across which dawn was beginning to creep. Duke stood with her hands held tightly in his, looking down into her eyes.

"Why won't you ride now to Menard and marry me, Charlotte?"

"Because, Duke, I'm never going to marry you. We're saying our good-byes now, for keeps. I want you to ride on, as you've always ridden on. Remember me as the Prairie Rose of the San Saba, maybe dream of me sometimes. I'd want that. But don't ever return to the Tumbling T range on the San Saba. Not ever, Duke. It has to be like that. I can't tell you why, but it must be that way. We've had tonight, and we'll have our dreams until they dim slowly, lost after a time, in the years that will come. That's all either of us can have of each other and it's all that we deserve. You can't make things different. You'll only be hurting me when you try. You see, Duke, I'm marrying my third cousin, Charlie Tolliver. I've given him my promise to marry him whenever he wants me to. Believe me, Duke, I know what I am doing. This is good-bye."

"I don't understand, Charlotte. You love me. I know inside my heart that you love me. And I love you. I've never said that to any woman on earth, and I've never asked any woman to marry me. Until tonight I didn't think there was a woman on earth who could make me say that. You can't marry that cattle-rustlin', drunken gun-slinger!"

"Please don't, Duke! Let's not spoil these last minutes together. Kiss me good-bye. Then go!"

She broke away from him and ran to her horse. Swinging into her saddle she was gone. Duke watched her out of sight. He smoked a cigarette, then at last he mounted his horse and headed for camp in the uncertain light of breaking dawn.

As he rode past a shadowy clump of brush his horse shied. There sounded the click of a gun hammer. Duke's spurs jumped his big black forward. His six-shooter returned the fire of shadowed guns that spat from either side of the trail.

A bullet tore along his shoulder, another nicked his cheek. Duke shot back over his left shoulder at the figure of a man who had straightened up, firing. Then Duke saw the man crumple, and was dimly aware of other guns off to the left. He lay low along the neck of his horse and ran for the shelter beyond the clearing. Bullets from at least two or more guns snarled around his head like droning hornets. Then he was out of sight, his horse stretched to a dead run, reloading his smoking six-shooter.

He was several miles from the sycamore grove, his horse slowed to a steady trot when Zack and three Star cowpunchers rode out of the gray dawn. They were coming at a long lope.

Old Zack pulled up, cussing like a mule skinner. His puckered blue eyes glared at his nephew whose face and shoulder were crudely bandaged.

"We heard shootin' a long ways off. You'd fed me that scarey damn lie about the Tollivers raidin' us at midnight, then rode off without tellin' a man where you was goin'. We hear shootin' and ride our horses down to git there. And then you show up with a wropped-up face and left wing and as silly a grin as ever I saw.

Now you damned, no-account, good-fer-nothin' hunk of bad news, where you bin and how'd you git hurt and who done it? And what was the idee in lyin' about that raid and havin' us ridin' herd all night on them dogies? You shore don't git that harum-scarum, flighty minded notions from the Starr side of the fam'ly. It's the wild Loveless in yore blood. Of all the.... You look peaked. Here. Take a drink. And go light on the bottle. It's fer snake bites, not hornet stings."

"Charlie Tolliver and his outfit may be fast cow-thieves," said Duke, taking a swallow from old Zack's flask, "but they're damn poor shots. Unless I got the wrong gent, the Prairie Rose of the San Saba is a widow before she's taken the vows of marriage. Here's how, Zack."

CHAPTER FOUR

Guardian of the Doomed Trail Herd

CHARLIE TOLLIVER, however, was not dead. As the Star outfit was breaking camp on the San Saba that morning, three cowpunchers rode up. Duke recognized one of them as being the man who, in the saloon at Menard, had protested the hanging of young Tug Tolliver. He was a man in his fifties, or perhaps he had reached sixty, for his hair was more white than straw colored and his leathery face was deeply lined. The two younger men were obviously his sons. He acted as spokesman now, addressing his talk to Zack Starr.

"If you could put the three of us on, mister, we'd be proud to work for you—me'n my two boys. You'll be needin' fightin' men before you reach the Brazos River and the Red, beyond it. Me'n my boys will make you three more hands. And we got good reason for hatin' the Tollivers. Charlie and his outfit cleaned us out last night. Run off our horses, cut our fences burned our haystacks and barns and cabins because we'd joined Marlin's vigilantes. Even though I'd taken my boys and pulled away from them last night because I couldn't stomach the idee of 'em hangin' young Tug. I can't stay in this part of the country no longer. If Charlie Tolliver and his Tumblin' T men don't kill us, Marlin and Deacon Smith will.

"Charlie's in town now with his outfit, shootin' out windows and paintin' Menard redder than a prairie fire. Marlin and Deacon Smith and their two-bit vigilantes coyoted durin' the night some time. Charlie Tolliver taken over Menard, and he and his outfit beat up my youngest boy Pete and give him twelve hours to quit the country. Charlie's hawg-wild drunk and makin' war talk ag'in the Star outfit. He's after the hide of Duke Loveless. That'll be you, mister?"

"That'll be me," nodded Duke. "You plumb certain Charlie Tolliver is in town, alive and kickin'?"

"Plenty alive and makin' war whoops you kin hear a mile. He claims you killed young Tug Tolliver last night at the sycamore grove down the river. They come on Tug's body there early this mornin'."

Duke's heavy black brows knit in a scowl. Young Tug, then, had been with the bushwhackers. And instead of Charlie Tolliver, it had been Charlotte's young brother who had stopped some of Duke's lead as he rode, shooting his way through the ambush gauntlet. He'd seen one of the bushwhackers go down in a crumpled heap. He'd hoped it was Charlie Tolliver. But he'd killed the kid brother of the girl he loved.

"These men," Duke told old Zack, "will do to take along. We'll need 'em. How many men has Charlie Tolliver got?"

"Mebbyso twenty-thirty. And they'll hang together. Charlotte thought the sun rose and set in that wild young hellion, Tug. She won't let the Tumblin' T men eat ner sleep in peace till they've wiped

out the debt of young Tug's bein' killed."

Duke nodded, feeling gingerly of his swollen black eye. He turned aside from old Zack's puckered stare.

"Turn your horses into the remuda," Zack told the men and his two tow headed sons. "This college dude ramrod will tell you what Star horses will be in your strings. You're hired, at fightin' wages."

"My name is Joe White," said the man. "My boys is Pete and Sam—twins. Twenty-two years old and top hands."

"Who in hell asked your names?" snapped old Zack, "or your pedigrees. You kin be King Solomon and sire your sons by the litter for all I give a damn. You'll find ca'tridges in the mess wagon. I furnish ca'tridges free." Old Zack stumped off on his bowed legs, cussing Duke for everything he could lay his vitrolic tongue to.

Duke smiled grimly, leading Joe White and his big, tow-headed twins towards the rope corral where the remuda was milling around and the Star cowhands were roping their mounts. Duke questioned Joe White briefly.

"What about young Tug, mister? Who found him?"

"It was Charlotte herself, near as Pete could learn while they was whuppin' him around in town. She come on Tug layin' along the trail, his horse not far off. There was nobody else around. How come her to be there, or Tug either, I don't know. She taken Tug to the Tumblin' T ranch and Charlie Tolliver fetched the news to town that Duke Loveless had killed young Tug Tolliver and Charlotte had declared war on the Star outfit. Charlie claims that you killed Scott Tolliver, her old man, down at Matamoras five years ago."

"As a messenger fetchin' bad news, mister," said Duke grimly, "you shore win first prize. You wouldn't have any more bad tidin's tucked in with your shirt tail?"

"Marlin and Deacon Smith are goin' to make a grab for the Star outfit when you and the Tollivers git done a-killin' off one another."

"Pick up the marbles, mister," said Duke. "You win, Bad-News White! You got Zack in the sweestest humor I've seen him in since he got a toe shot off. I should stake you to the rough string, but I'm chicken hearted about seein' a bronc cripple a good fightin' man. Rope out that flea-bit gray and ride him like you owned him. Sam, ketch that high-headed brown. Pete, dab your line on that bald-faced bay."

DUKE found old Zack cooling a cup of black coffee behind the mess wagon. The old cowman glowered at his nephew but said nothing.

"Zack," said Duke, "did you kill a man named Scott Tolliver five years ago at Matamoros?"

"There was a Scott Tolliver got killed down there. I ain't claimin' the credit, personal. You mighta owned the bullet that sent that cow-thievin' ol' son to hell. I'm no glory-hunter that claims the scalp of every renegade that crosses my gunsights. If you want the credit fer that rustler's hide, claim it and welcome."

"Was it in that fight you had between Brownsville and Matamoros that Scott Tolliver got killed?"

"That was the fight. Him and some more renegades tried to run off our remuda. We lost a man er two. They got three-four killed. We planted 'em at the boothill at Brownsville. I recollect a girl showed up and had his grave marked with a stone monument. She had a Mexican stone cutter make a right pert lookin' headstone — "Scott Tolliver, Cowman, Murdered." Near as I recollect, that's the way it reads. I ain't plumb positive. It don't make no difference, does it?"

Something of his customary snappishness was gone from old Zack's tone. Duke detected it and eyed the old cowman sharply.

"Supposin', Zack, it does make a difference? You act like you're holdin' out on me."

"You never seen that tombstone, then?"

"No. I don't spend my town time visitin' graveyards and readin' the headstones."

"We taken it as a sort of josh on you, Duke. It was while you was off gittin' college learnin' that we had that gun fight with them renegades. And this Scott Tolliver feller got shot in the back somehow, I think by one of his own outfit. And that girl that said she was his daughter showed up at Brownsville and had a Mexican whittle out a headstone. "Scott Tolliver," it reads. "Cowman—Murdered by Duke Loveless." Duke, is that the girl you bin gittin' tangled with here on the San Saba?"

"That's the girl, Zack. She's the only woman I ever met that I ever looked back at a second time. I met her last night. I got bushwhacked when I rode away from the sycamore grove down the river. I shot one of 'em. I reckon it was her kid brother. I asked her to marry me last night, Zack. I meant it. But she turned me down cold. Said she couldn't. Scott Tolliver is the reason. She's bin thinkin' all along that I shot her father in the back."

"She had you bushwhacked, Duke. That girl may be all you claim she is, yet everybody but you seems onto the fact that she's hell on wheels. She's the rustler queen of the San Saba — Charlotte Tolliver's Tumblin' T outfit."

"You mean Charlie Tolliver's gang."

"Ask the feller and his two tow-headed sons. Since she had that carvin' put on her father's headstone, Charlotte Tolliver has rode at the head of the Tumblin' T rustlers. Charlie Tolliver sounds like Charlotte Tolliver, don't it? Half the time it's Charlotte Tolliver's Tumblin' T they're sayin' when they talk about the rustlers of the San Saba. You think I'm lyin'?"

"No. No, you wouldn't lie to any man, Zack. But she didn't have me bushwhacked. I'd swear to it."

"I don't like to see you whupped thisaway, Duke. Damn that female! Forget her."

"You don't understand, Zack."

"Mebby not, Duke, but most mebby I do. I got bit the same way when I was about your age. Bit hard. Never got plumb over it. That's why I never married. I couldn't trust the best of 'em after that. I shore don't want you goin' through the hell I did. I'm almighty hard on you most of the time, Duke. Cuss you out and torment the hell outa you. You've never yet crossed me with a word. I think a heap of you, son—more than you figger."

"I savvy, Zack. When it come down to it, I wouldn't swap you for a paint horse with a silver mounted Mex saddle throwed in for boot," grinned Duke.

"If you're dead sot on the she-rustler, Duke," chuckled the old cowman, "I'll he'p you throw and hogtie 'er. We could use a she-rustler on the trail up to the Red. I'd like to see the lady. She must top the filly bunch to git your hide full of cactus thataway. From what I hear, she's another Calamity Jane or another Belle Starr, who might or might not be your odd-cousin. I'd be proud to look 'er over. Name your game, Duke. You got the outfit backin' your play. . . . Now quit standin' there like a cow waitin' to be milked. Git this outfit a-rollin'. Git outa my sight, you dude-learned, trouble-makin' young hellion!"

So Duke rode out to point the trail head north.

BATTERED-LOOKING young Pete White, was riding up on the swing. He reined his horse over to talk to Duke.

"I didn't git the chance to tell you," he said, "and the information might not be worth two-bits, but Deacon Smith and Marlin rode to the sycamore grove last

night. They left town about midnight. I was nappin' in the loft at the feed barn when they got their horses. And I overheard Marlin tell Deacon Smith that he'd got word somehow that Charlotte Tolliver had headed for there when she left her cabin where she stays when she's in Menard."

"She was in Menard last night?"

"For about half an hour. Some time after Tug Tolliver got away. There's a Mexican woman keeps house for her in town. Marlin either bought the woman off or beat her till she told that Charlotte Tolliver had bin there and gone. Anyhow Marlin and Deacon Smith pulled out just about midnight. That'd git 'em to the sycamore grove before daylight. Meb-by you kin make somethin' of it. Dad'd kill me fer tellin' you this. Keep it quiet."

Duke nodded. "Mum's the word, Pete. Just keep what you've told me sort of under your hat. I'll do the same. Joe White won't know."

Pete dropped back and Duke rode on up to the point of the herd alone. His brain was working carefully back over last night's happenings, from the time he'd met Charlotte until he'd run through the ambush.

Duke had taken Charlotte's word that nobody was in hiding anywhere near the sycamore grove. But there had been a couple of hours while they sat on the river bank, back in the deep shadows, when Tug might have slipped back there. Certainly the men who had ambushed him at the edge of the grove of trees had managed to get there without Duke or Charlotte being aware of it.

Charlotte, as near as Duke could recall, had been gone probably fifteen minutes when he had mounted his horse and started for camp. Then he had ridden blindly into the ambush.

Duke's brows knitted as he concentrated on that man who had jumped from behind the brush, shooting, and then had reeled and crumpled. He would take his oath that the man had been much larger than young Tug Tolliver.

"That wasn't the boy I shot down," he said aloud. "That man was as big as Marlin. By God, it was Marlin!"

It was as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Duke, no matter what Charlotte believed, had not shot her young brother. Any more than he had been guilty, five years ago, of the murder of her father, Scott Tolliver.

"I'll find Charlotte," he told himself, "and I'll make her believe the truth. And I'll make a believer out of her cousin Charlie Tolliver, if I have to teach him the truth with a six-shooter."

He saw old Zack come up on the other side of the point of the herd. "It's forty miles to Waldrip where we cross the Colorado," called Zack. "Cow Gap is this side, ten-fifteen miles. Cow Gap is where the N Bar outfit lost a hundred head of cattle on the way up. It's where the Mule Shoe and the Block and the Seven Up and other big outfits goin' north has bin takin' their big losin's. We'll run into trouble when we drive through Cow Gap tomorrow evenin', because Cow Gap is a dry camp unless she's a wet season and rains fill the water holes. Joe White tells me the water holes is dried up this year, and we can't lay over till she rains. We'll have a walk-bawl thirsty herd to hold tonight when we bed 'em down this side of Cow Gap, so I'm walkin' 'em today till they'll be too laig-weary to run far if they're spooked at night. It'll take more than the Tumblin' T men to stampede the Star herd far. I'd ruther knock a few pounds of taller off my steers than to spill ary part of 'em in a stampede. We'll learn the Tollivers somethin' about the trail-herd business. You can't stampede a balked herd, and Duke, we're balkin' the Star herd till the leaders bog down in their dusty tracks!"

Old Zack had fired men for trotting a

beef steer on a long trail drive. It was like cutting chunks of meat off his own bones to walk the tallow off his steers. But a gaunt herd is better than a stampeded one.

TWENTY-SEVEN hundred head of longhorn steers strung out at a shuffling walk. Dust showed in a long, yellow ribbon stretching back along the trail for miles. The men who slapped the drags along with trailing rope ends pulled their neck-scarves up across their mouths and nostrils as the dust rose and settled, powdering their skins and hats and clothes.

The big lead steers shuffled doggedly along as the sun of the afternoon dropped toward the western skyline. A few of the weaker steers, footsore and lame, had been allowed to drop behind. From dawn until dusk shadowed the broken hills of Cow Gap ahead, the Star herd was pushed along.

Joe White had piloted the horse wrangler and the remuda to some water holes a few miles off the trail where the remuda was watered about sundown. The water barrels on the mess wagon and bed wagon gave water to the men, but the trail herd was bedded down dry, sulled and restless.

Perhaps twenty or thirty of the lead steers were not too leg-weary to stand in their tracks at dusk. The bulk of the herd was balked.

"They'll lay like they were hogtied," said Duke.

"Till last guard time," agreed Zack. "Then their laigs will be rested and they'll be drier than ever. Spooky, too. None of us got more'n an hour's sleep last night, and we ain't none of us ketchin' ary shuteye tonight. But tell the boys to ride easy and no shootin' unless we're raided. Because to'rds mornin' these dogies is goin' to be restless. One shot will spook 'em. And they'll scatter like a mad squaw's dust. The Tumblin' T rustlers is likely bushed up right now at Cow Gap, makin' bad medicine and gittin' fixed to pay us a visit tonight. But unless they wait till to'rds mornin' to play wolf, they won't be able to blast this sulled herd off the bedground if they had a cannon."

"Charlie Tolliver," said the grizzled Joe White, "will hit us at midnight. Charlie's superstitious thataway. Claims he was born at midnight and that's his lucky hour."

Old Zack gave him a withering look. "You seem to know a heap about Charlie Tolliver, mister. Knowed him long?"

"Since he was a button," said Joe White stiffly.

"Then you knowed Scott Tolliver, I reckon?"

"I knowed the whole Tolliver tribe."

"So I figgered. Ketch your night horses, men. Joe White here says we'll have Tolliver's fer midnight supper."

Zack moved off towards the mess wagon for a cup of coffee. Duke caught up with him.

"You treat Joe White like he was a sheep-herder, Zack."

Old Zack Starr snorted. "He'll be tellin' me next what Charlie Tolliver eats fer breakfast and that Charlie Tolliver has a wart on his belly and waters his likker with rattler pizen. What do you want me to do? Shine his boots fer him? Listen, Duke. Come about eleven o'clock, you take your pick of six men and slip off to where the night hawk is holdin' the remuda. I'll hold the cattle with the rest of the men. Say nothin' to nobody and pick the toughest, fightin'est men in the outfit. Charlie Tolliver or that she-rustler Charlotte Tolliver is goin' to make a hard, fast play tonight for the remuda. And they'll hit you at midnight."

"Then Joe White, you figure, is tellin' the truth about Charlie Tolliver bein' superstitious about the midnight hour?"

"I'm playin' a hunch, son. Somethin' that I didn't learn by goin' to any fancy-priced college. Just slip off from the herd about an hour before midnight. Take six

of the boys with yuh. Hold that remuda. The nighthawk's got his orders. He'll hold the remuda in that long draw yonder. You and your men stay back a ways from where the horses are. The nighthawk knows you'll be somewheres near. You needn't go near him. And when your rustlers show up, take to 'em. Wipe 'em out like you'd kill off so many wolves. If your she-rustler is with 'em, she'll have to take her chances along with her men. But she won't be with 'em, unless my hunch is all wrong. You got your orders, Duke. Foller 'em."

"You're the doctor, Zack."

"Good medicine is mostly bitter medicine. Nothin' sugar-coated about ol' Zack Starr's pills!" Zack filled his cup with black coffee, blew softly on its black, steaming surface. His eyes were as hard as blue steel.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Fight at Cow Gap

WHEN the hands of his big silver-cased watch pointed to eleven, Duke Loveless rode slowly around the bedded herd. Every man in the outfit was supposed to be on guard tonight. Duke picked his six men.

"Slip off to camp," he told each of his picked men. "I'll meet you there."

He had circled the bedded herd. There was a puzzled expression on his face when he met old Zack who reined up. "I picked my six men, Zack. Sent 'em to camp. I'll meet 'em there. I've bin plumb around the herd. Accounted for every man in the outfit but three. Joe White and his two sons is missin'."

"What am I supposed to do? Bust down a-bawlin'?"

"You don't act surprised."

"Nope. The Pete twin 'lowed his head was hurtin' him and he asked could he go to camp. I let him go. The Sam twin slipped away not ten minutes ago. I didn't try to stop 'im."

"Where's Joe White, Zack?"

"I left him tied to the hind wheel of the mess wagon. The cook was feedin' him what he calls rattlesnake toddies. One of 'em makes a man think he's goin' to die. The second 'un has him hopin' he will die before he gits the third 'un poured down his throat. Joe White had told his right name after the first rattlesnake toddy had hit the bottom of his stomach. Come breakfast time, Duke, and that gent will be in proper shape to tell a-plenty. Don't untie him and don't bother the cook. Take your six men and hold that remuda. You might recognize the Pete and Sam twins amongst the curly wolves that come after the ponies. Shoot the young whelps on sight. Neither of 'em went near camp. They both taken the same direction when they figgered they was outa my sight. They headed straight as the crow flies fer Cow Gap. Joe White's name used to be Tolliver till he got in a bad tight at San Antone and had to change it. Unless I'm guessin' wrong, Duke, he'll tell us who shot Scott Tolliver in the back down between Matamoros and Brownsville one moonlight night five years ago. But we ain't got time till breakfast to listen to his story. Git along, Duke. Pull the slack outa your lower jaw and git out to that remuda. Rattle your dew-claws. Charlie Tolliver's watch may be runnin' a little fast and he'll misjudge his midnight."

Duke rode on to the wagon. He found the cook bending over Joe White while the half dozen Star cowpunchers stood around grinning.

"Don't! Gawdamighty, man, don't!" Joe White was begging in a croaking voice. He was retching as the old round-up cook held a tin cup brimming with a foul-odored mixture to the man's quivering mouth.

"Nothin' like a good rattlesnake toddy, Joe, to set a man up proper. This 'un

will trim you up like a Christmas tree."

"What do you want to know?" croaked the man who called himself Joe White.

"Who's in that pack of night wolves that's payin' us a visit tonight?"

"Charlie—The Tumblin' T riders. . . ."

"Charlotte?"

"No, she—she broke with Charlie. Got suspicious about him throwin' in with Deacon Smith and Marlin. Charlie sent Marlin and Deacon Smith to the sycamore grove to bushwack Duke Loveless last night. Charlotte's Mexican woman give Marlin a note Charlie wrote him, sayin' Duke would meet her at the sycamore grove and tellin' Marlin that if him and Deacon Smith wanted to keep on livin' they better git there and kill Duke Loveless. Charlie had give her his word he'd lay off Duke. Charlie would stay at the ranch fer his alibi. Marlin and the Deacon would do his killin'. . . .

"Duke got away. Young Tug had follered Marlin and Deacon Smith there and when they opened up on Duke, Tug commenced shootin' at Marlin and the Deacon. He shot Marlin and Deacon Smith shot Tug. . . . Charlotte heard the shootin' and rode back. Smith had drug it, takin' Marlin, who was wounded, with him. . . . Charlotte found Tug shot, still livin' but unconscious. She taken him to the ranch and sent Charlie to town fer the doctor. She wouldn't accuse Duke of the shootin'. When Charlie accused Duke she called him a liar and some other hard names. Charlie come to town all right, but he didn't send no doctor to the ranch fer to take a look at Tug. Charlie lets on to like Tug, but he really hates the kid. . . .

"It was my boy Pete that got holt of the doctor and sent him to the Tumblin' T ranch to take a look at young Tug. Charlie beat hell outa Pete for that. Pete and young Tug is kinda partners. Pete thinks Charlotte is part angel. We can't trust Pete. Charlie would have killed Pete if I'd let 'im. . . . Charlotte ain't takin' no part in this raid. It's Charlie and Deacon Smith." Joe White was looking up at Duke now. The man's face was grayish green, his bloodshot eyes dulled and glazed with nausea.

The old round-up cook grinned at Duke, kicking Joe White none too gently in the belly.

"I reckon that's all you'll need outa him now, ain't it, Duke? You kin shoot to hit when them curly wolves raid the remuda. You won't be shootin' at the Charlotte lady. She's at the Tumblin' T ranch, nursin' her kid brother who is dyin' from a dose of lead poison shot into his belly by Deacon Smith. This Joe White gent's name is Joe Tolliver. Me'n Zack recognized him. I'll have all the truth doctored outa him by the time you git back, Duke. . . . Hold your head back, Joe. Mouth wide open now or I'll puncture your belly with the point of this butcher knife in my other hand. Time for your medicine, Joe Tolliver."

Duke motioned to his men and got on his horse. They headed for the long draw where the nighthawk was holding the remuda.

Young Pete rode up out of the shadows.

"I come back to the herd and Zack sent me on to tell you what I told him. Charlie Tolliver and Deacon Smith and the Tumblin' T men is a-comin'. I rode out to make sure. Sam rode to meet 'em. Sam and me made 'er up to tell you. We're quittin' our step-dad, Joe Tolliver, because you saved Tug from hangin'. Sam's supposed to pilot 'em to where the remuda is. I was to fetch back word that he'll lead 'em down from the head of the long draw. You kin be below and skylight 'em as they top the ridge. Please, Duke, tell the Star men not to shoot my brother Sam White. But Joe's ornery. He need's killin', Joe Tolliver does."

"We won't shoot Sam. I'm obliged, Pete. Now slip on back to the herd and

find Zack tell him that you talked to me."

"Deacon Smith and Marlin double-crossed the vigilantes and throwed in with Charlie. But Tug and you shot Marlin so he won't be with the raiders tonight. Deacon Smith will be with 'em, though. He shot Tug and Tug is my partner. I'd like to stay here and git that tinhorn, Duke."

"I'll take care of Deacon Smith," Duke told the battered young cowpuncher.

He sent Pete back to the herd and gave his men their orders.

"Sam is goin' to lead the Tumblin' T pack over younder ridge and in by the head of the draw. Spot Sam and don't shoot his way. As for the rest of that pack, we're drawin' fightin' pay and earnin' it." He scattered his men at vantage points and rode down to where the nighthawk was holding the remuda.

"At the first shot, haze that remuda for camp like the devil was after you with his hot pitchfork. Get the horses clear of the shootin'. You let us boys handle the fightin'. That's all."

Duke Loveless rode alone towards the head of the draw. His men had their orders. Duke knew that regardless of odds, the Star cowpunchers would save the remuda. Duke gave himself the special job of spotting Deacon Smith and Charlie Tolliver, and settling his own debt with those two murderous gentlemen.

Then, he told himself, when the fighting was over he'd saddle a fresh horse and ride to the Tumbling T ranch to see Charlotte Tolliver.

"I plumb forgot," he told himself, "to ask if there's a marryin' preacher at Menard!"

As he reached the shadows at the head of the draw, there sounded the thud of shod hoofs. A group of riders topped the ridge and were silhouetted against the moonlit sky. Charlie Tolliver and the Tumbling T rustlers split in groups of twos and threes and came down the slope of the draw at a lope, but at that distance there was no way of identifying one from another.

Duke thought he recognized Deacon Smith astride a light colored sorrel. He sent a warning shoot over the man's head. That was the signal for which his men were waiting.

"Take to 'em, cowhands!" roared Duke amid a fusillade of shots, and the fight was on.

THE man on the sunburned sorrel was Deacon Smith. Duke caught a good glimpse of the black-clad tinhorn as the latter whirled his horse and spurred for the shelter of brush. Charlie Tolliver and his night riders, confused and bewildered by the unexpected gunfire, their ranks swept by deadly lead from half a dozen carbines, broke and ran for cover. The Tumbling T riders numbered probably fifteen. But they had no way of knowing how many Star cowpunchers lay behind the rocks and brush in the long draw. The nighthawk's blacksnake was popping like a rapid fire gun as he hazed his bunched remuda to a run.

A harsh voice, Charlie Tolliver's voice Duke reckoned, was shouting wild, profane orders to his men. Duke's lips spread in a mirthless grin as he headed down the slope towards Deacon Smith, to cut the tinhorn off before he could gain the shelter of the brush or the ruined, abandoned old adobe which showed in the moonlight. He held his fire until the gambler sighted him and commenced shooting.

Deacon Smith was a fast man with a gun, deadly at close quarters across a poker table or in a saloon. But this was open range gun-fighting, and the man was out of his element. His victims had, for the most part, been men whose gun-hands were made slow and clumsy by tanglefoot whiskey, fed them by the man behind the bar who worked in with the gambler.

"Play your hand out, gambler!" called Duke, heading him off. "I'm dealin' and

the deck ain't marked! Come on and fight, you kid-murderin' tinhorn sport! Duke Loveless opens this jackpot!"

Deacon Smith saw the man on the big black horse charging down the slope toward him, cutting him off from the shelter he needed. And he did just what Duke figured he'd do; he started shooting wildly.

The gambler's bullets whined past Duke's head as Duke's big black bore down on him like the rush of an avalanche. The tinhorn's horse, badly frightened by the shooting, reared and lunged, got its head and whirled down hill, pitching.

Deacon Smith was no bronc rider. He lost a stirrup, and grabbed desperately for the saddle horn. As Duke's big black came alongside, Duke dropped his knotted bridle reins over his saddle horn. He reached out with his left arm and jerked the gambler out of the saddle. And with Deacon Smith thrown in front of him across the saddle horn, Duke rode for a nearby brush patch.

Behind the brush, Duke slid his horse to a halt. The gambler was fighting now like a madman. Duke gripped the struggling tinhorn in a bear-hug, kicked his feet from the stirrups and pitched headlong into the brush with the man in his arms.

They landed with a jarring thud—squarely on top of a man who crouched there, too bewildered and surprised to get out of the way.

Duke saw the man just as they landed on top of him. He knew it was not one of the Star cowpunchers. He heard the man cry out hoarsely and at almost the same instant he felt a sharp, thin pain in his shoulder. Deacon Smith had a knife in his hand.

Duke, in his wild rush to get his hands on the tinhorn, had thrown the odds to the gambler's side. This was Deacon Smith's way of fighting. And now the gambler had a Tumbling T killer to back his play.

There was no time to think in those split-seconds when Deacon Smith's knife was stabbing and ripping at Duke's back and shoulders. The gambler was underneath and was twisting and squirming as Duke clubbed at him with his gun-barrel. The next second the third man was tangled in the dog-fight, and Duke fought to clear himself of the tangle of arms and legs.

He found a foothold with one leg, braced himself and threw his weight backwards. He rolled clear and came to his feet with a lurch. The gun in his hand spewed flame, and Deacon Smith was shooting at him with a short barreled, double-action "belly-gun."

The big .44 slugs were wicked at that close range. One of them would tear a hole the size of a man's hand where it came out, and the flash of the snub barreled gun was blinding. The Tumbling T man was scrambling clear now.

Duke's gun spat fire just as the gambler's belly-gun exploded. A scream of pain came from the Tumbling T man as the wild slug meant for Duke plowed into his thigh. Duke shot again at the gambler. Deacon Smith crumpled in a black heap almost at Duke's feet. The Tumbling T man shot at Duke. The shot missed. Duke's gun roared and also missed.

TWO more Tumbling T men bore down on Duke, shooting as they came. Duke crouched low. His first shot knocked one of them from the saddle. The second man swerved his horse, charged off into the night and the third swayed, clutching for the horn. He fell before he'd galloped three rods. Duke saw the flash of a gun. The remaining rustler reeled drunkenly in his saddle and then pitched sideways as his horse dodged a bush.

Duke reloaded his empty gun and rolled Deacon Smith over on his back. The moonlight fell squarely on the tinhorn's sallow face. The man was dead.

For some minutes Duke crouched there in the shadows of the deserted old building, watching and listening. He saw a rider top the ridge, his horse spurred to a dead run, and vanish on the other side. Riderless horses trotted here and there, stepping on dragging bridle reins. Duke's big black gelding, the bridle reins dropped over the saddle loosely, was moving around restlessly, his head tossing, whistling through wide nostrils.

"Steady, boy!" Duke quit the shelter to get his horse. "Steady. It's about over. Steady, feller. . . . Stand your hand, you, behind that bush! Stand up. Reach high when you come out!"

"That you, Duke? Don't shoot! It's Sam! I can't stand. I'm shot in the laigs. Charlie Tolliver shot me!"

"Where is he?" Duke slid the bridle reins over his horse's head and bent over the wounded young cowboy.

"He got away—run fer it. I seen him toppin' the ridge just now. When he knowed he was trapped he coyoted on his men. He's headed fer the Tumblin' T ranch, I reckon. He's loco drunk and he'll take his orneriness out on Tug and Charlotte. . . . "

The young cowpuncher's face was gray and pain-twisted. Duke tied tourniquets above the bullet wounds in his legs. Other riders were topping the ridge now. Those of the Tumbling T riders who were not killed or too badly wounded to ride, were spurring for safety. The Star cowhands sent a last scattered volley after the routed renegades.

Duke hailed one of his men. "Look after Sam, here." Then he swung into the saddle and called to his men. "Come on, cowhands! Run 'em down!"

Beyond the ridge could be heard the scattered sound of gunfire. Out of the moonlight rode old Zack and a couple of Star cowpunchers.

"We got all but Charlie Tolliver headed off. We're holdin' 'em while you go after that Charlie coyote. He's your personal bear meat, Duke. Young Pete White sighted him, headed for the Tumblin' T ranch. I'll clean up here and foller you along when I git the job done."

CHAPTER SIX

Duke Meets the Killer

CHARLIE TOLLIVER had a long head-start and an open field for his escape. And he was riding the best ridge-runner circle-horse in the Tumbling T remuda.

Duke lost a precious quarter of an hour skirting the fight that was being waged between the trapped Tumbling T rustlers and the Star cowpunchers. Then he gave his big black gelding its head and headed for the Tumbling T ranch at a long, steady lope.

Not until he was riding alone, free of the fighting back yonder, did he take stock of his own wounds. Deacon Smith's knife had stabbed and slashed his back and shoulders in half a dozen places. He was bleeding a lot and pains shot up the back of his neck, throbbing dully in his temples.

The wounds were where he could not reach them to halt the blood flow. In a few hours he would bleed to death, but the Tumbling T ranch was only a few miles distant. He'd make it there in half an hour. His one hope was that he wouldn't be too weakened by loss of blood to shoot straight and fast when he met Charlie Tolliver.

Those miles seemed endless; the minutes dragged into an eternity. The gait of his horse seemed snail-like and sluggish. Though he knew that the big, game hearted black was giving his best.

He felt a little giddy and weak. When the lights at the Tumbling T ranch showed, they seemed to waver and dance. Duke gritted his teeth, shook his aching head, blinked his eyes, trying to make them focus so that the lights yonder would

remain steady. He wondered if there could be but one light showing, or if his impaired vision was playing him tricks. He'd need keen, perfect eye-sight and a steady hand in a few minutes when he faced Charlie Tolliver in a gun fight.

The buildings and corrals at the Tumbling T ranch stood at the foot of a slope dropping from a wide strip of benchland. There was a big spring nearby, and a grove of trees. The main road came directly down the long, easy slope of the ridge. Duke quit the main road and approached the ranch building from the rear.

He heard a man shouting hoarse orders at the top of his lungs. That would be Charlie Tolliver's voice, Duke reckoned as he followed a twisting course through the giant cottonwoods. As he rode nearer he grinned and gripped his gun tighter. His eyes were all right. The moving lights that bobbed around crazily were lanterns being carried by men who were trotting around the barn and corrals, between the main house, cook cabin and bunkhouse.

"Git them two horses saddled!" bellowed the harsh voice. "Throw her saddle on one, mine on the other. She's comin' along with me if I have to drag 'er outa that house by her hair. You're takin' your orders from me, damn your ornery hides! You seen me kill one man fer crossin' me and I'll kill the rest of you ornery, two-bit ranch hands if you don't step more lively. Hook that damned doctor's team to his buckboard. There's goin' to be funerals enough around here to keep Deacon Smith busy fer a month of Sundays preachin' funeral speeches. Climb up in the seat of your rig, sawbones. You're headed fer town."

Duke pulled up at the edge of the brush about fifty yards from the barn and corrals. For a minute he sat his horse, taking in the scene revealed in the moonlight and by the flickering, swinging lights of the several lanterns.

A team was being hooked to a buckboard. Near the barn two horses were being saddled. A tall, rawboned figure, a six-shooter swinging in each hand, was poking a white-haired, paunchy, hatless man onto the seat of the buckboard.

"Take them lines when the barn man hands 'em to you, Doc. Pour the whip to your team. Keep goin'. Slack up and I'll put a bullet in your fat paunch."

Then the front door of the main house opened. Duke saw Charlotte Tolliver dressed in a gingham house dress, come out onto the porch. She had a sawed-off shotgun in her hands.

"Charlie!" she called out hoarsely, "Don't send the doctor away! Let him stay here and look after Tug! I'll do what you want! I'll go with you! I'll marry you whenever you say! Send the doctor back here! You win, Charlie!"

"Then throw away that damned scattergun and git out here!"

"Can't I stay till the doctor get's Tug past the danger? Tug needs me, Charlie. He'll die unless I stay!"

"Dry up! Git out here. Throw that gun away and fork that horse. I got no time to waste. Let the damned brat die. He shoulda bin born dead, anyhow!"

Duke let his big black horse head towards the lanky Charlie Tolliver. The horse's gait was a natural running walk and Duke knew that he made an easy target for the drunken killer. But he was too weak and dizzy to dismount.

The figure of Charlie Tolliver dimmed and wavered, and the lantern lights seemed fuzzy, moving in twisted, grotesque circles.

Duke knew that he had only a few seconds left before he'd reel from the saddle and pitch senseless to the ground. He had to get Charlie Tolliver now or never.

DIMLY he heard Charlotte's sharp cry and he saw one of Charlie Tolliver's guns spit flame. He felt the thudding,

burning shock of a heavy .45 slug tear his left arm. Then the gun in his hand was roaring. The big black horse was carrying him straight at Charlie Tolliver who was shooting with both guns now. Duke had one brief, swift fleeting moment when his vision cleared, and he thumbed the hammer of his six-shooter before he pitched headlong from the saddle. He landed not more than ten feet from Charlie Tolliver.

Charlie Tolliver's long legs were buckling slowly at the knees. His head was sagging forward. His face twisted horribly. His ugly, bloodshot eyes glazed. The two guns hung limply in hands that had lost their strength. The man was dead on his feet, before his legs suddenly gave way and he dropped in a grotesque heap, arms outflung, hands still clinging to his murderous guns.

The doctor's team of fat, gentle bays, had jumped at the first shot and had loped jerkily out of the immediate confusion. They halted near the corral, lines dragging. The doctor jumped from his seat and ran behind the corral.

It was Charlotte Tolliver who lifted Duke's limp bloody form and somehow dragged him into the house. Then the badly scared doctor showed up.

"Get busy, you cowardly little fat worm," she told him. "You quit once tonight, but you're not quitting again. You'll save this man's life or I'll horsewhip you to death!"

She carried Duke into the same room where lay young Tug, white and almost deathlike in a coma.

The pudgy little doctor, his face still putty-colored and beaded with cold sweat, looked from the boy to the blood-smeared man Charlotte had put on her own bed. Then he looked up at the girl.

"Which?" he questioned. "I can't take care of them both at the same time. . . ."

"Take a look at Tug. Give him that injection that's half an hour overdue. Hurry, you little toad. I'll take care of my own man!"

She delved into the doctor's bag, came out with scissors, bandages, sponges. Swiftly, deftly, moving with desperate speed, she cut away Duke's shirt. He opened his eyes, grinning feebly.

"Take care of—your own man. Good enough, ma'am. I'll make a live of it. . . . You goin' to cut off that moustache?"

Charlotte's breath caught in a choked sob. She blinked the tears that clung to her long black lashes, and laughed shakily. "I'll never have a better chance, Duke," she said, and with two neat clips of the blade, Duke's drooping black moustache was gone.

She poured him a stiff drink of whiskey. "Cowhand's medicine, Duke. That bullet didn't break your arm. You're all cut around the shoulders and you've bled gallons, by the looks of your clothes."

"Losin' a few drops of blood never killed a tough hand," Duke swallowed the raw whiskey. "How's Tug?"

"Finer'n frog hair," sounded the boy's voice feebly. Charlotte straightened with a sobbing little cry.

"Tug! Tug, honey! Duke, he's alive again!"

"Easy," warned the doctor.

"Me and Duke," said young Tug faintly, "are shore a pair of tough hands!" His eyes closed. A faint smile showed on the boy's pale face.

"He's past the crisis," said the doctor, inserting the hypodermic needle in the boy's arm. "He'll live. Now if you'll stand aside, I'll patch your cowhand up. And quit calling me a cowardly toad, Charlotte. Damn it all, I brought you and Tug both into this world. Charlie Tolliver grabbed me outside, held a gun on me and bullied me around. He'd have killed me as quickly as he'd have killed that ranch hand who crossed him somehow. That cousin of yours was loco drunk. I'm a doctor, not a

gun-fighter. Who is this man who did the world a good turn by killing Charlie Tolliver?"

Duke was unconcious again and could not have heard the girl's answer. But his tightly pulled lips twitched in a smile as she spoke.

"He's Duke Loveless of the Star outfit. No notches on his gun, only one on his heart. He's the man I'm going to marry, Doc. Patch him up. And do a top-hand job."

AT the sound of boot heels and spurs in the doorway, Charlotte looked up. She stared hard at the short, bow-legged, white whiskered little old cowman who stood there, his battered hat in his hand.

"I'm Zack Starr. I just overheard what you told the doc. I reckon you must be Charlotte Tolliver. I don't blame Duke. You're purtier'n a litter of bird dawg pups—and a she-rustler, to boot! In spite of that handicap of college learnin' that worthless, trouble-huntin' nephew of mine shore picked hisse'f a winner. I'm proud to know you, Charlotte. You'll do to take along."

Charlotte took his outstretched hand. Then she deliberately kissed him. Old Zack's hide reddened and he chuckled softly into his white whiskers. Then Charlotte helped the doctor dress Duke's wounds.

Old Zack poured himself a drink and gulped it down. "Your Tumblin' T layout," he told Charlotte, "is wiped out. Includin' the murderin' snake that shot your dad, Scott Tolliver, in the back five years ago. Joe Tolliver done that murder. He's done confessed. You see, your daddy was the only one of the outfit that knowed his record and that knowed his name was Joe Tolliver instead of Joe White. Joe killed the real Joe White and run off with White's widder and twin boys, then taken Joe White's name. Joe Tolliver was scared your dad would turn him over to the law. So when the sign was right to lay the killin' onto the Star outfit, he up and shot Scott in the back. He done told the story in front of witnesses. We never killed your daddy, young lady. My boys just hung the snake that murdered Scott Tolliver."

The girl flashed him a warming smile. "I'm glad. More glad than you can understand. I thought Duke had killed him, and I'd made up my mind that I was going to marry Duke, regardless, because he is the only man on earth I could ever love. Even though I'd sworn to wipe out the Star outfit. To do it, I'd even promised Charlie I'd marry him if he'd quit whiskey. So if I couldn't have Duke, it didn't matter much who I married. Perhaps you can understand?"

"Perfect," said old Zack, helping himself to another drink. "Never did I see two likelier lookin' young colts mated to travel in double harness. Duke needs a woman like you that'll ride with him instead of hog-tyin' him with her apron strings. You'll do to side him fer life."

"And Duke said you were the crankiest, orneriest old cuss in all the counties in Texas. But the grandest and squarest."

"If you wasn't the right woman fer Duke," said old Zack Starr, gesturing with the bottle, "You'd find out how ornery I could act."

"I can believe that, too," she laughed.

"How many cattle you got in your own iron?"

"I own the Tumbling T brand. It was my dad's and I fell heir to it when he died. I delivered a trail herd at Dodge City last month. I'll have only about four hundred head of steers left to gather."

"Fair enough. We'll gather 'em while Duke and the Tug button are mendin'. Trim 'em to three hundred and put 'em in the Long X road iron. I'm givin' you and Duke that Long X trail herd fer a weddin' present. You're goin' up the trail with us."

"Me? A she-rustler?" laughed Charlotte Tolliver shakily.

"They tell it that ol' Zack Starr hires nothin' but top-hands, and they're plumb right! I'm proud to have you, ma'am. You'll do to ride up the trail with the Lone Star outfit any day. Here's how!"

Probably that was the only pretty speech old Zack Starr had made since the days, long ago, when his hair had been as black as Duke's and his ways had been as wild and reckless. And when he lifted his glass the brightness of his puckered blue eyes was misted. As if, in looking at Charlotte Tolliver, he saw another girl—a girl who had died one night on the Texas plains and taken the softer part of Zack Starr with her . . . .

That sunrise found Zack Starr and his cowhands riding into the little cowtown of Menard.

"Paint 'er red, cowhands," he told them. "You done earned your fire water. We got our trail herd made. The Tumblin' T is goin' into the Long X road iron, North Star bound. Drink hearty, men. The war paint's on me and my spurs is let out to the town-hole. We're drinkin' the health of Duke Loveless and Charlotte Tolliver, the rustler queen of the San Saba. You just come from hangin' the man that killed her daddy. And you'll dance at her weddin'."

The Star outfit had lost two men in the fighting. They were buried the next day at Menard. And nearby graves held the coffins of Deacon Smith, Charlie Tolliver, and renegade Joe Tolliver. Other mounds marked the final resting places of Tumbling T rustlers.

The Tumbling T bunkhouse was turned into a makeshift hospital where Sam White and other wounded men were cared for. Pete White helped Charlotte and the doctor. Zack spent most of the day there and pulled out at sundown to ride back to his outfit that was holding over a week or two on the San Saba until Duke and Tug were in shape to ride again. Zack was letting his men celebrate another night, then taking part of them to round up the Tumbling T cattle which would be put in the Long X road iron.

"That headstone I had made at Brownsville," Charlotte told old Zack when she watched him saddle his horse at the barn. "I'm going down there some day and change it."

"Save yourse'f the ride, ma'am," said old Zack. "I done that job long ago. While Duke was down in Mexico gatherin' cattle fer this trail herd, I had a new headstone made. I don't claim to be no prophet, but Duke had growed that moustache and in other ways kinda tipped his hand. And I had the readin' on your daddy's headstone changed to, 'Scott Tolliver, Cowman.' Underneath I had put his Tumblin' T brand. I kinda figgered you'd want it thataway some day."

THE END

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By JOHN G. PEARSOL

She got a gun. . . . And let him make his getaway. . . .

Cattleman Blood Breaks the Drouth

During that maddening drouth, a dead man on the jailhouse floor and the brutal injuring of a youngster ignited the dread spark of war which could only be extinguished in cowman blood. . . . Yet young Sheriff Lawton had given his solemn oath to keep peace on that troubled Pyote range—or die!

THROUGH the heat waves, as he looked from the window of his office in town, Sheriff Phil Lawton saw the four riders stirring the dust toward Pyote, and to him they represented hate and greed, bloody war, and grim tragedy. The greed had always been there. But the drought was bringing the

hate and the war and the tragedy in a range dried of water and withered, parched grass.

Two of the riders Phil Lawton recognized as Bill Shelton and his son Cliff. They were big ranchers, the biggest in the country, and the drought had hit them hard. Another rider, coming in from the south, was Bert Henson. Bert Henson had always wished to be known as the cattle king of the Pyote country. Everyone knew that he had always envied Shelton, and perhaps secretly hated him. But it took Duke Lattimer, and what he had done, to add fuel to the flames—Duke Lattimer, plus the drought. And now the two Sheltons, Bert Henson, and Duke Lattimer were riding into Pyote at once. . . .

Sheriff Phil Lawton, rose, yanked down the brim of his black hat and went out of the office. He walked down the street, trying to reach the Silver Dollar Saloon before the riders could get there.

Lawton was at the saloon door as Bert Henson rode up, dropped his bronc's reins and went on inside.

"Hiah, Sheriff," Henson said as he went on in the door. "If this damn heat doesn't let up there'll be hell to pay."

Phil Lawton nodded. He knew there'd be hell to pay, and Duke Lattimer would be the spark that would set the range afire.

Then the two others, Shelton and his son Cliff, came on. They too stopped at the saloon, and big Bill Shelton nodded to Phil as he pushed on through the half-doors. Ordinarily he would have stopped to exchange a few words with Lawton, but the heat, the lack of rain, the struggle these men were making to hold onto the things they'd worked for all their lives, had changed them. They didn't smile any more. Their faces were flushed and lined and their eyes were shadowed, worried, and driven-looking. They were letting things they couldn't help warp their judgment, making them hate men they shouldn't hate and blaming their neighbors for the workings of nature.

After Bill Shelton and Cliff had gone inside the saloon, Phil Lawton still waited at the door, watching Duke Lattimer come on. Phil Lawton had always thought a lot of Duke Lattimer. He'd grown up with Duke, worked with him, and had given him credit for the things he'd done in the past few years. Duke Lattimer had made something out of himself in spite of a handicap that would have sent any ordinary man out of the country on the run.

There had been the time when Duke's father had been caught rustling cattle. Duke was just a youngster when they'd hung his dad to a tree limb, and when Duke was grown he'd had a hell of a time getting a job. He'd be fired here and there when cattle would be missed, but instead of running, instead of trying to get a start somewhere else, he had stuck out his jaw and let them hit it again. He'd managed to save a little money and bought a piece of land. He'd worked like a Trojan and made the little land pay him dividends. He bought cattle and made his herd grow.

They all laughed when Duke Lattimer started out on his own, and they laughed even louder when he got his cattle. It was the same when he started to build a dam that blocked the arroyo which went through his range. Even when the arroyo back of the dam filled up with water drained down from the mountains they still laughed. What good would that water do if a dry spell came? There was nothing to feed the reservoir. But when Duke blasted a ditch through a rise and changed the course of Devil's Creek, the ranchers changed their tune. Now Duke Lattimer's water wouldn't waste away, because the creek fed his dam. Yet he hadn't taken any water away from the other ranchers because he had built his dam only up to

the level of the creek. The lower ranchers got just the same water they had always gotten by the over-flow from Duke's reservoir.

But now there was war in the air. It was senseless and silly, but folks forgot that Duke Lattimer's dam hadn't stopped any of the creek water. They saw only that Duke Lattimer had water when the lower ranches had not enough. Duke's dam was brewing a war between Bert Henson and Bill Shelton for the possession of the range just below Duke Lattimer's dam. Also it was brewing a war between Bill Shelton and Duke, because Bill Shelton was jealous of his position as the biggest cattleman in the country; and if the weather didn't break Bill Shelton wouldn't be that any more. If the weather didn't break Henson and Shelton would go broke, and Duke Lattimer, the rustler's son, the kid whom they had kicked around would be the biggest cattleman in the country. More than that—he'd be the *only* cattleman in the country!

PHIL LAWTON watched Duke Lattimer stop, dismount and tie his bronc's reins to the hitch rack. Duke's face, like those of the others, was flushed. There were the same deep lines of worry and strain about his mouth, but his eyes were different. There was definite resentment and hatred in them. Phil Lawton guessed that Duke had been hearing the talk, young Cliff Shelton's talk, to the effect that building a dam was just about what might be expected from a gent with Lattimer blood in his veins.

But Duke Lattimer grinned when he saw Phil Lawton. From a grim and bitter-lipped man, he became the easy-going kid that Phil Lawton had always liked.

"Still hot, Phil," he said. "It makes it hell on the range."

Somehow, Phil Lawton couldn't grin back at Duke. He kept thinking about Henson and Shelton inside the saloon. Now Duke Lattimer was going in, with those sparks of hate flecking his eyes. Phil Lawton nodded soberly.

"It does make it hell, Duke," he said. "And I wish you'd do me a favor."

Duke Lattimer stopped and the grin faded from his face. He looked at the saloon door, then back at Phil Lawton again.

"What favor, Phil?" he asked. "But maybe I know. . . ."

By the way Duke asked that, Phil Lawton knew he'd fail in what he was going to try to do. Duke Lattimer had come here for the express purpose of finding Cliff Shelton. Duke knew he was in the saloon.

"The favor of not going into the Silver Dollar, Duke," Phil Lawton said. "Henson's in there; Bill Shelton and Cliff are in there, too. There'll be an argument, then there'll be a fight. I don't want it. It'll start something we can't stop."

A tiny smile tinged Duke Lattimer's lips. He looked at the saloon door again, then at Phil Lawton. He shook his head.

"You don't know what you're asking me to do, Phil," he said. "You're asking me to pass up a lot of nasty talk. You're asking me to let Cliff Shelton run off at the mouth with a bunch of dirty lies that should be crammed back down his throat. I took their abuse when I was a kid because I couldn't help myself. But I won't take it now."

"You're going in?" asked the sheriff.

"Yes, Phil, I'm going in and call Cliff Shelton a damn liar," said Duke Lattimer. "I'm going in to tell him that if he's got any remarks about the son of a rustler, to make 'em to my face. I'm sorry, Phil, but that's the way it stacks up."

Phil Lawton stood there and let his own lips turn down a bit scornfully. "I can't stop you," he said finally. "There's no law against calling a man a liar. But

there is such a thing as being big enough to take some slander for the sake of the whole community. I sort of thought maybe you'd be big enough for that."

Duke Lattimer looked long at Phil Lawton. Then he made a little impatient motion with his hands.

"Did the whole community ever do anything for me?" he asked, then pushed on in the saloon door.

Phil Lawton couldn't justly blame Duke Lattimer as he stood there and watched the doors slap shut. Nobody ever gave Duke a chance. If he was bitter, it was because of what someone else had done. If he was unfeeling it was because no one had ever had any feeling for him.

Phil Lawton pushed the saloon doors open and followed Duke Lattimer into the Silver Dollar. He felt the tension as he crossed the room to the bar. There Henson stood at one end, a scowl on his face, and Bill Shelton and Cliff stood at the other, his big features twisted into a half sneer. And Duke Lattimer stood between then, about ten feet from each.

Duke was smiling, a nasty smile that the ranchers could see in the bar mirror. Duke took a drink then set his glass down hard on the bar.

"I rode into town to teach manners to a high-headed skunk," he announced, as though to remind himself of what he must do. But his eyes found Cliff Shelton's there in the mirror behind the bar.

Duke said no more, and nobody else said anything, but Cliff Shelton flushed. That tension grew more taut, but Phil Lawton could do nothing to dispel it.

"You meaning me?" finally asked Cliff Shelton, turning a little toward him.

Duke Lattimer turned very slowly. That insulting smile was still on his lips as he looked at Cliff Shelton.

"I called a name," he said evenly, "and you piped up and answered to it. You seem to know your own brand, Cliff. Sure, I meant you. You run off at the mouth too much. You take too many liberties with my name. You keep harping on the fact that my father was hung for rustling. I'm going to slap your mouth for you. And if that won't shut you up, maybe there'll be another way."

While he talked, Duke Lattimer kept moving slowly forward, and Cliff Shelton's face paled a little. He dropped his hand toward his gun. The smile left Duke Lattimer's lips when Cliff did that.

Phil Lawton started forward quickly, a yell forming on his lips, but the yell was drowned by the crash of a shot, as Cliff Shelton tried to whip a gun from his holster. Duke Lattimer had moved a little sidewise. His hand had whipped down and up. Then he was standing there, tight-lipped and a little pale, watching Cliff Shelton sink slowly down to the saloon floor.

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. Big Bill Shelton looked down at his son while gradual realization that Cliff was dead seeped into his eyes. He took a step forward and Duke Lattimer's gun swung up to cover him, but Bill Shelton seemed not to see Duke.

He squatted down beside Cliff and kept looking at him with that pained, puzzled look, as though this was the first time in Bill Shelton's life that he was up against something he couldn't buck. His kid was dead, and he couldn't bring him back. Bill Shelton couldn't boss death like he bossed the range. . . .

Finally he looked up at Duke Lattimer, whose guns were still in his hands. Then Bill Shelton looked at Phil Lawton.

"Arrest him, Lawton," Shelton said slowly. "Arrest that damn murderer and put him in jail."

Henson, at the other end of the bar, spoke up before Phil Lawton could move or speak.

"Duke Lattimer didn't murder anybody, Shelton," Henson said. "Cliff went for his gun first. I saw it."

Big Bill Shelton wagged his head around to look at Henson, his lips smiling with bitter contempt.

"I know what's eatin' you," he said to Henson. "Right now you're playin' for a little favor. You've wanted that land below Duke Lattimer's dam ever since he built it. You think you'll get it if you team up with Lattimer. But you won't get it. I've fought men like you and Lattimer all my life, and whipped 'em all my life. Duke Lattimer forced his fight on Cliff. He made him go for his gun so he could kill him. I'm going to hang him for that, if it costs me every nickel I've got!"

Phil Lawton stepped forward. He knew Shelton was right in one respect. Henson was using Duke Lattimer as an excuse for a break with Shelton. Right or wrong, if Duke was in jail that war would be delayed, and Phil Lawton wished he could have jailed Duke. But he couldn't. Fundamentally Duke Lattimer was wrong. He should have stayed out of the Silver Dollar.

But on the surface of things he was right.

"Put your gun in your holster, Duke," Phil Lawton ordered as he went forward. "And I'd take it kindly, Henson, if you'd leave town for a while. You're all fightin' the bit. You talk wild and say things you wouldn't say if you wasn't driven crazy by this damned heat. I can't arrest Duke Lattimer for this—but I will arrest the next man that talks war in town. I'm trying to stop something you'd all be sorry to see happen. I'm trying to keep the range from running red with blood. The least you all can do is sit back and wait. When it rains you'll forget it.

"I suppose a rain will wipe out the fact that I've lost my son," said Big Bill Shelton. "A rain will bring him back!"

"Or maybe a rain will wipe the hoggishness out of Big Bill's soul," said Henson. "He's always hogged range. He always will. He—"

"Shut up, Henson!" said Phil Lawton sharply. "I'm warning you for the last time, all of you. The man that makes the next crack goes to jail, and I'll keep him there till the drought breaks, if I have to stand guard over him with a gun! I mean that, sure as hell!"

"You're the one that's talkin' wild now, Lawton," said Shelton.

"Mebby so," said Phil Lawton. "If you just have to have trouble, I'll start it, and I'll finish it!"

PHIL LAWTON watched Bert Henson ride down the street beside Duke Lattimer, and he smiled bitterly. Before the drought Bert Henson wouldn't have been caught dead with Duke because he hated Duke's insides, and he still did. But Bert Henson was clever.

Bill Shelton went down to the livery and rented a buckboard, came back up to the saloon and loaded his son's body into it. Then he drove away, his shoulders bowed.

His eyes had been vainly trying to register this new thing that had come to him.

He was overcome now, dazed by his loss. But soon, tomorrow, or next day, he would find that hate for Duke Lattimer had crept up on him. He'd look at the grave of his son and think of the man who had killed him. Then Bill Shelton would take his men and ride toward Duke Lattimer's place. And Henson's men would be there, too.

This was Henson's chance to get in on the ground floor. Under the pretext of standing up for justice, Bert Henson would plant his men at Duke's ranch. Phil Lawton could see it all plainly; he knew it all would happen as clearly as though it had already occurred. But there was nothing he could do to stop it, just as there had been nothing he could do to stop Duke Lattimer from going into the Silver Dollar Saloon.

Phil Lawton rode slowly, tiredly up the street, and the heat waves blasted him with the fire of a hundred days of cloudless sky. The air was hot, so hot that the fire of it seemed to get into a man's brain. He looked up at the office door and saw Anita, his kid sister, the motherless girl he took care of, who lived in the quarters behind the sheriff's office. To Phil Lawton, Anita was the whole world, and that strained look was erased from his face as he smiled at her.

Anita followed Phil into the office and sat near him at his desk.

"Was somebody hurt, Phil?" she asked as she looked up into his face. "I saw Mister Shelton carry Cliff out."

Phil Lawton nodded. "Cliff was hurt, honey," Phil Lawton said. "A gun went off by accident and shot him."

Anita Lawton looked at her brother, and Phil suspected she knew he was lying. She could tell that Phil didn't want to talk of the accident he said had happened.

"It's going to rain, Phil," she said, as though she sensed that this would cheer him; as though she knew that this was the thing that would wipe out the lines of worry in the faces of men and the fire of desperation in their eyes.

Phil Lawton studied her serious face.

"Why, honey?" he asked her.

"Because it says so in the Bible that mother told us to read," said Anita confidently. "It says: 'Ask and it shall be given unto you.' And I've asked. I've prayed for it, and I know it will come!"

Phil Lawton watched her go back into the other room and he wondered bitterly if the Bible said anything about men who went crazy; men who wanted to kill each other; men like Duke Lattimer who wouldn't listen to reason, or men like Bert Henson whose greed made them march over the dead bodies to gain the range they wanted. He guessed there wasn't, because Cliff Shelton was dead, and Bert Henson had ridden away with Duke Lattimer, and now Big Bill Shelton would arm his riders for war.

The sun blazed hot and the heat waves shimmered and danced as Phil Lawton looked down the street. The few riders who passed were all the same, all tired, shoulder-drooping men with their energy sapped by that hellish heat. All men whose tempers were short; whose nerves were frayed, their ponies lagging as they rode morosely into Pyote and out again.

It would rain, Anita was sure. Her mother's Bible said so.

Somehow, Phil Lawton wanted to laugh at that.

OFF THROUGH the heat-quivered haze, a black dot on the edge of town grew larger before Phil Lawton's eyes as he sat there at the office window. He watched and saw after a while that it was Bill Shelton coming back.

Big Bill stopped at the city hall and

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THE MARCH ISSUE IS ON SALE FEBRUARY 10th

went inside. A few minutes later he came on up the street, turning in at the sheriff's office. He stopped just inside the door and held out a paper.

"This is a warrant for Duke Lattimer's arrest," he told Phil Lawton. "I'm going to *make* you arrest him. I've sworn it out, and the charge is murder. Maybe I can find a jury that will look under the surface and see that Lattimer forced that fight on Cliff."

He stopped for a minute and stared from tired eyes at Phil Lawton, and then Phil felt sorry as hell for Big Bill Shelton. All the grief and the sorrow and the misery in the world was registered on his face. He was smashed all to hell by the loss of Cliff. . . .

"That's the way I have to do it," Bill Shelton went on. He raised a hand and tapped himself on the chest. "You see, I'm fighting what's in here, inside of me. I want to take some men and ride over and blast him to hell. I want to blow up his dam. I want to kill him, and I want to fight Henson. But I'm fighting that, because I know it's not the right thing to do. Instead of that, I'll try the law. I'll try to hold myself in check if Duke Lattimer is behind bars."

Phil Lawton reached out and took the warrant. He tucked it in his vest pocket.

"I'll serve it," he told Shelton. "But what will happen when a jury turns Duke Lattimer loose, Shelton? Because they'll do it, and you won't have a leg to stand on. The thing to do is forget vengeance, to start over, and really believe that everybody is trying to do the best they can. Three months ago nobody hated anybody else, but the drought has warped our minds. It made Duke Lattimer resent the things Cliff had been saying. It made Cliff say the things he'd been thinking. Let me talk to Duke, and Henson."

Big Bill Shelton shook his head stubbornly. "Serve the warrant," he said. "You got to serve it."

Phil Lawton nodded tiredly. "I'll serve it," he said.

Then he watched Bill Shelton tramp out of the office. Knowingly or not, Big Bill Shelton was adding fuel to the fire by saddling something onto the law to save himself. Phil Lawton knew that Henson would take advantage of Duke Lattimer's arrest. He'd object to it. He might even help Duke Lattimer fight against it; he'd do anything to get Bill Shelton's riders away from that range below Lattimer's dam. . . .

Phil Lawton went out, saddled his pony, and rode westward toward Duke Lattimer's ranch. He climbed into the hills and watched the sun sink down to the edge of the mountains, throwing a crimson glow over the sky. That glow seemed to Phil Lawton to be a promise of the blood that soon would stain the range. As he rode up to Lattimer's cabin, he saw three Circle H horses in the corral and knew that he had been right. Henson was throwing in with Lattimer.

Duke Lattimer was with the three Henson men as Phil Lawton came to the door. Phil stood there for a moment and looked at Duke.

"Shelton swore out a warrant for your arrest, Duke," Phil said. "I've got to serve it. Saddle a horse and come along."

For a moment Phil was afraid Duke would refuse. Duke's face flushed, his eyes narrowed. Then he rose, shrugged, and went out to saddle a pony.

"It looks like Bill Shelton's money can buy anything," said a Henson man. "Even the law."

"That'll be enough of that," warned Phil Lawton.

The Henson man grinned. "Well, maybe Henson can buy something," he added. "Maybe if Shelton can get him in, then Henson can get him out."

Lawton didn't answer, but as he rode away with Duke Lattimer before him, he listened to the beat of horse's hoofs

behind him fading away into the distance in the direction of Hensom's ranch, and he knew that Henson's man had gone to tell his boss that Duke Lattimer had been jailed. Here was more fuel to a fire that was growing.

Phil Lawton thought bitterly again of his sister, Anita and her faith as he rode on through the dusk. It might rain, but not in time to stop Bert Henson from making a total damn fool of himself. Not in time to stop Henson from striking the final fire that would set Big Bill Shelton up on his horse, riding to war.

"You better give me your gun, Duke," Phil Lawton said as they neared town. "I don't suppose it would look so very good for a sheriff to bring in a prisoner with his gun still in his holster."

That insulting smile came to Duke Lattimer's lips, the same kind of a smile that had been there when he had gone into the Silver Dollar to call Cliff Shelton a liar.

"If you want my opinion," he said coldly. "I think it all stinks. I think Henson's puncher was right. I think Shelton has bought you!"

WORDLESSLY, Phil Lawton locked Duke Lattimer in a cell, then he went back into the office and handed the cell key to old Hawley, the jailer. Phil Lawton kept hearing Duke Lattimer saying, "I think Shelton bought you." And he kept hearing the Henson man saying that if Shelton could put Duke in, maybe Henson could get him out.

Get him out how? It was a cinch that Henson couldn't *buy* Duke Lattimer out of jail. There was only one other way to get him out, and that was to take him out by force.

Phil Lawton compressed his lips, tightened his hat down on his head and started toward the cell corridor. If there were any such notions in Henson's head, they had better be changed quick.

"Mebby you better lock up, Hawley," Phil Lawton told the old jailer. "I've got a hunch that there'll be trouble about jailing Lattimer. Lock the jail door and don't open up till I get back."

Phil Lawton went down the corridor and stopped at Duke's cell. Duke was a shadow in there, in the semi-darkness, but Phil Lawton could see that damnable smile on his lips by the light that filtered in through the window.

"You've been mighty free with your talk, Duke," Phil Lawton said tightly. "You and everybody else have let your hot heads run away with your good judgment. So now I'll say my piece. In the first place you're a damn fool to believe that Henson wants anything out of you but a chance to hit at Shelton. He'll do everything he can bring on a war, then he'll turn on you. He doesn't give a damn who dies, just so he gets what he wants. And you don't give a damn who dies, just so you can stand up on your hind legs and bray about your honor.

"You don't want anybody slandering your good name. You killed Cliff Shelton because he kept mentioning that your father was a rustler. Well, damn your selfish hide, all he did was tell the truth! He *was* a rustler! And it begins to look as though Cliff was right about everything else, too! You could have saved a lot of trouble if you'd let things slide for a while. But no. You had to talk big. And because you did it, hell is going to pop. Henson will try to get you out of here, and when he does that somebody will get killed. If that happens, I hope you have a good time thinking about the men you've caused to die!"

Phil Lawton didn't wait for Duke Lattimer to answer. He walked on and stopped for a minute to kiss his sister good-bye. He remembered her faith in the Bible— "Ask and it shall be given unto you . . . ."

It was nice to think, if you could believe

it. He hoped she'd never be disillusioned about that.

"Be a good girl, hon," he told her. "I'll be back in a couple hours."

Then he went out, got his horse and headed for Henson's. He rode with the wind in his face and now, after dark, it was still hot, still like a blast of a furnace in his eyes. He rode fast and recklessly, because he had to stop Henson before he started. If Henson ever got his riders up and started toward town . . . .

Phil Lawton stopped at a rise that let him look down at Henson's ranch house. The house was dark. Maybe Phil was too late, but he pushed his horse forward and went down to the corral.

Only a few horses were there and the house was empty. Phil Lawton whirled his bronc and raced back the way he had come. He rode harder now, and his lips were tight as he thought of Anita, there at the jail. If Henson harmed her. . . .

For an hour Phil Lawton rode furiously. He thundered into Pyote and up the street to the jail. He leaped off his horse and ran up the steps. Then he stopped and stared.

The battered door lay splintered on the office floor. He looked at old Hawley, dead beside it, a bullet hole in the side of his head.

His heart beating fast, Phil Lawton went on through the jail corrider and back into the room where Anita should have been. She was not there. Phil called her name, but there was no answer. He moved out through the dark corrider again and looked down the street. A man was hurrying toward him, and Phil Lawton grew cold inside. Anita gone; a man hurrying. . . .

Phil stood there and looked at the fellow. It was Childers, the blacksmith, and he stopped and looked at Lawton for a while before he spoke.

"Tell me, dammit!" Lawton finally shouted. "Anita! Where is she?"

She's down at the doc's," said Childers. "Mebby you better come on down."

Phil Lawton moved forward as though in a trance. Anita, down at the doc's!

Like a dirge in his ears was the sound of his boot heels as he went down the street beside Childers. He stopped at the door of the doc's office and looked in at the tiny figure on the bed. Anita, with her head bandaged, apparently asleep. . . . Or was she asleep. . . .?

FOR THAT moment the world seemed to stand still for Phil Lawton. Then the doc looked up and smiled.

"She'll be all right," he said.

Phil Lawton had to shake himself out of that black mood that had so swiftly descended upon him. But it wasn't all right that she had been hurt, nor was it all right that Hawley was dead. . . .

"What happened?" he asked.

"All anybody knows is what Duke Lattimer told," the doc said. "Some men rode into town to the jail. They hammered at the door, and Hawley wouldn't open. They called out that they wanted Duke Lattimer, and started to shoot. A bullet evidently went through a window and hit Hawley. Then they smashed in the door. But Anita heard the shooting and was scared. She'd always liked Duke, so she sneaked in and got a key and let him out the back way.

"Duke thought she was staying behind, but evidently she followed him, for when Duke got across the street and down an alley he turned around and saw the riders race down the street from the jail, probably after him when they didn't find him in jail. Anita was just crossing the street. It was dark, and they didn't see her. One of the horses hit her. Duke came back and picked her up and carried her here."

"And where is Duke Lattimer now" asked Phil Lawton.

"He's gone," said the Doc. "But he left a note here for you."

Phil Lawton reached out and took the folded piece of paper from the doctor's hand while the wild, hot blood pounded in his brain. So Duke Lattimer was gone, and the Henson man had said if Shelton got him in, Henson would get him out. . . . And Duke had probably gone to find Henson, to flaunt himself in front of Shelton, to bring more war, to be the cause of more dying men.

Phil Lawton smiled grimly. He unpinned his badge and laid it down on the table beside the bed where Anita lay. He stuffed Duke Lattimer's note into his vest pocket and hitched up his two guns.

"Read the letter," said the doctor. "It says that—"

Phil Lawton's cold, hard laugh cut in on him. "What the hell do I care what it says?" he asked harshly. "It probably says he's sorry but that he had to defend his good name. It probably tells me that I just don't sabe how it is to be labeled a skunk, and that he thinks I'm a swell fellow, but he has to go out with a gun and fight for what he thinks is right."

Phil Lawton's words rushed out in a hard, brittle torrent of bitterness. "He wants to fight," he went on. "so I'll give him a good one. Henson wants to fight, and Shelton wants to fight. And I'll accommodate them too. I'll quit being a sheriff and be what they are!"

Phil Lawton rushed outside, leaped on his horse and started toward Henson's place. That bitter twisted smile formed on his lips as he raced along through the night. They all wanted to fight, and they'd all get what they wanted. They'd pay for Hawley's death, and for hurting Anita. They'd pay in the same coin they wanted to dish out. . . . With hot lead!

Lights blazed up suddenly in front of Phil Lawton's eyes as he raced along and he realized that he was at Henson's. He slowed and inched his bronc toward an open door where many horses were ground-hitched. He dismounted and stopped at the doorway. Henson and eight of his men were all in the house.

"Ready for war, I see," said Lawton. "All ready to ride away on a trip. Well, you can call it off. You'll get all the fight you want right here. You can settle now for Hawley and Anita. You—"

And Phil Lawton, in that cold, lashing voice, cursed them till he was out of breath. But they didn't move. Instead, they seemed fascinated by the ferocity of this man before them. Henson's face paled as he studied Phil Lawton's eyes, and saw the bitter twist to his lips.

"Hawley and Anita?" he asked, puzzlement in his voice. "Have you gone crazy, Lawton?"

Lawton nodded. "You know I'm not crazy," he said. "Just crazy with the urge to blow hell out of you. Crazy to kill the selfish, uncaring skunks that shot Hawley and trampled Anita when they came to get Duke Lattimer out of jail. I think it was you, and I'm going to kill you for it!"

Henson's laugh was uneasy and forced. He shook his head. "Then you won't kill anybody here," he said positively. "Nobody from this ranch has been to town. Nobody here has tried to take Duke Lattimer out of jail. That's gospel, Lawton. You have to believe that. If me, or any of my men had shot Old Man Hawley, or hurt that little sister of yours, you could shoot me right now and I wouldn't lift a hand. But we didn't."

THERE was no disbelieving Henson, for there was truth in his voice, truth in the way he looked. It was there, undeniably. Phil Lawton turned and went out to his horse again. He rode away toward Duke Lattimer's ranch and on the still hot air while he rode along, he could hear the mutter of the hoofs behind him. He knew where Henson was going. Henson had not liberated Duke Lattimer, but he

was moving his cattle up to the range below Duke's dam. Lawton passed the cattle, bunched beside the trail, as he raced along. Henson was forcing the issue tonight . . . .

Phil Lawton didn't give a damn what Henson did with his cattle. After he saw Bill Shelton, maybe there would be no Shelton for Henson to fight. After he saw Duke Lattimer, maybe there would be no Duke Lattimer, either. If there was anybody left to fight after Phil Lawton finished this night, then let them have it!

Dimly, in the light ahead of him, the squat black form of Duke Lattimer's cabin loomed ahead of Phil Lawton, but the cabin was dark as Lawton galloped up. He looked off across the flats and saw the ring of Bill Shelton's men, guarding the range Henson wanted. The white light of the big moon showed them plainly. Phil Lawton moved forward again toward Shelton and his riders. If Henson had not killed Hawley, trampled Anita, then Shelton must have done it.

The blood pounding again in his brain, Phil Lawton rode forward. Up above him, on the crags where Duke Lattimer's dam was tied to the canyon sides, a shadow moved, and Phil Lawton stopped for a moment.

He watched and the shadow moved again. It was a man afoot, who looked a lot like Duke Lattimer, lugging something heavy in his hands. Phil Lawton moved up closer. In the white light of the moon, Lawton saw that it was Duke. But what was he carrying? It looked like a small barrel. Why . . . . ?

A sudden hunch made Phil Lawton reach into his pocket and pull out the note Duke Lattimer had left for him. He held it up so that the light of the round moon fell squarely upon it:

> Phil:
>
> I began to think after you left the jail. You're right. All they did was tell the truth, and all I did was raise a lot of hell I could just as well not done. I hope Anita will be all right. I don't know who hurt her, or I'd tell you. I've got a keg of blasting powder, and I'll fix everything with what I've got. If Anita could know, I'm sure she'd understand. She think I'm fine, and this is about the only way I know to live up to what she thinks of me. Thanks for being so swell to me when everybody else was so rotten.
>
> Duke.

Phil Lawton looked up from the note. Duke Lattimer was climbing down the steep slope of the canyon, hugging the keg of blasting powder to him. That sudden hunch, cold and definite, came to Phil Lawton again. . . .

Phil leaped off his horse and started to scramble up the rocky slope. He yelled loudly, but Duke Lattimer didn't stop.

Panting, Phil Lawton looked down into the canyon as he reached the top of the rocky cliff. He saw a match sputter in the darkness. He saw the outlined figure of Duke Lattimer, his arms upflung in a gesture of seeming defiance at that wall of stone in front of him. Then there was a terrific blast . . . .

Phil Lawton looked down at a turbid river that flowed out of Duke Lattimer's dam. He looked down at the flat where Big Bill Shelton was pushing his cattle up out of the reach of that rushing water, and Phil sabied then how completely Duke Lattimer had done the thing to make all war impossible now.

A keg of powder . . . .

There had been just one way for Duke to blow up his dam, and he had done it. In one final, grand gesture he had made the land below his dam worthless, so that Henson would not need to fight Shelton for it. With that one final gesture, Duke Lattimer had taken himself out of the fight, so that Shelton would have nothing to fight about. . . .

PHIL LAWTON climbed down the slope. He rode slowly across the flats

and stopped in front of Bill Shelton. Without a word, Phil Lawton handed Shelton the note Duke Lattimer had written. He watched him read it, and when he looked up, Shelton's face was full of white and strained.

"It was me, Phil," he said slowly. "I led that raid into Pyote. I kept brooding about what you said, about a jury setting Lattimer free. I cracked, and we went in to take Duke and hang him. I don't know who fired the shot that killed Hawley, and I don't know who hurt Anita, but I'll plead guilty to it. You can hang me and I'll never utter a word in my own defense. I cracked up and did the same thing I condemned in other men. I'm ready to take my medicine."

Phil Lawton shook his head and looked down the arroyo where the water from Duke Lattimer's dam was spreading over the flats. He remembered the rage that had possessed him; how he had wanted to kill the man who had shot Hawley and who had trampled Anita. He, too, had come near to doing a thing he'd have condemned in some one else, and somehow, now, that rage was gone from him. Somehow, too, Duke Lattimer, the man these ranchers had despised, had risen up to a new height, to show them the way to decency, and forbearance and forgiveness.

Phil Lawton shook his head slowly. "Duke Lattimer stopped a war, Shelton," he said. "The way he did it shames me for the things I thought just an hour ago. If you know you killed Hawley, come in and give yourself up. If you don't know. . . ."

Phil Lawton mounted his horse again. He headed back toward Pyote in the darkness. Then it was that he glimpsed the flickering of lightning in the east and heard the faint welcome muttering of distant thunder.

Phil couldn't see the distance-dwarfed figure of a lone horseman high up on the peaks above him. But the man on horseback saw Phil Lawton, limned against the lightning flashes.

And Duke Lattimer, as he lifted his hand in one last salute, knew that he was leaving forever the range he'd fought for, without a peso between him and the world, and with his face and body powder-blackened and bleeding. He knew that his going would insure a lasting peace to the Pyote range . . . .

Phil couldn't see the distance-dwarfed But he was smiling softly just then, thinking that whatever way Duke Lattimer had chosen to go, he had done the ultimate thing to show his manhood. . . .

The smile was still on Phil's lips as he rode into Pyote. He was thinking of Anita and her faith. She had thought Duke Lattimer was a swell gent. . . . Well, she's been right—always right. . . .

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BULLET-HARVEST

By CLIFF FARRELL

Neither burning homesteads, nor blasting dynamite could drive Wade Dalhart from his land. . . . For he had promised to face alone the guns of a mad cowman legion—so that his spineless nester neighbors might save their own hides by running!

CHAPTER ONE

No Room for Nesters!

WADE DELHART, heading toward the little cowtown of Liberty, kept steadily overtaking the mail stage as he jogged along the twisting trail among the rimrock on Red Bluff. The mudholes in the thawing road were still roiled from the churning of the wheels when he rounded a boulder-girded turn. Then, two seconds later he was fighting for his life.

FOR SODBUSTERS

Rose screamed as the intruders tried to drag her from the saddle, while the others struggled with Wade. . . .

The stage had halted in the trail fifty yards ahead, and five masked men were swarming around it. Wilcey Johnson, the knot-faced driver, was just setting the brake and holding his left hand aloft in surrender as he controlled his horses.

The road agents had overlooked the possibility of a rider appearing on the trail. As Wade's head jerked up one of them sighted him. The masked man lifted a hoarse shout of warning to his companion, and the same instant began spilling lead.

The first bullet missed Wade by inches.

The second slapped through the peak of his gray hat, twisting it askew on his thick, black hair.

Wade, with the shock of amazement still running through him, met that attack with instinctive, desperate speed. His own gun was out and bucking in his hand before the outlaw could empty a third shell.

Wade's first shot struck two inches above the bandana mask that came to the bridge of the man's nose. The road agent was dead before his body pitched convulsively into a mudhole beneath the wheels of the body of the stage.

There were four more of them, and they opened up now with braces of six-shooters. Wade felt the wind of bullets past his face as he looked into a flaming hell of spitting guns.

A slug twitched at his coat sleeve and he left the saddle in a desperate dive. Another nicked the heel of his cowhide boot as he made the cover of a trail-side granite boulder. Hastily he jammed fresh loads in his gun.

Only then was he aware of a shrill scream sounding above the hoarse shouting and bellow of guns. His lips were drawn back in something that might have been either a snarl or a grin as he came to his knees and peered around the edge of the boulder.

The driver had seen his chance to escape. He was pouring rawhide to the team, and the vehicle leaped ahead with a lurch. Ahead of the careening stage a masked man scurried aside to avoid the hoofs of the oncoming team, and veered his attention from Wade long enough to take a hurried shot at the driver.

Wade saw the driver stagger on the seat. But the man was game. He shifted the reins to his left hand, and sent the stage lurching swiftly away out of danger.

Now the four road agents massed their raging attack on Wade's position. Slugs chipped the boulder and howled away like lost spirits. Wade crouched down, timing his next move until the first fury of the gunfire had dwindled. Then he came up smoking.

WADE'S first slug threw a streamer of mud over a masked man who was crouching on his knees, seeking a bead. His next shot sent another diving to cover with a grunt of pain. Wade had the advantage of position. His boulder was on a rise, and the outlaws were below him, with more than one hundred feet of open space to cover. They realized their handicap now, and all of them raced frantically to cover.

Forted up behind rocks, they threw lead at Wade's shelter, emptying their guns in futile rage. Then suddenly they gave up the fight, realizing that they could not storm the position of the lone volunteer stage defender unless they were prepared to pay a heavy toll.

The roll of guns dwindled then died. Wade glimpsed them scuttling away among the boulders off the trail. He jammed fresh shells into his six-shooter, and harried them with a few more shots, but the clatter of hoofs soon arose and began fading into the distance. He sighted them once more as they clattered over a ridge and out of range.

Wade came to his feet after a time, and drew a long and grateful breath. He was quivering at the knees, and began to sweat a little. It had all happened with such startling rapidity that it now seemed like a dream. But the sprawled body which had been crushed deeper in the mud of the trail by the stage wheels proved its stark reality.

Wade got up stiffly—walked down the trail and looked at the dead outlaw. It was a thin, evil face, matted with a month's growth of gray-tinged whiskers. Wade had never before seen the man.

He caught up his horse, slapped mud on the two bullet gouges the animal had

picked up, and rode on down the trail. Out in the open sage flats, half a mile away, the stage had slowed up. Wade waved and the driver pulled his team to a stop, and waited.

Three excited men, two cowmen and a Liberty store keeper, piled out as Wade rode up. Wade knew them by sight. As he dismounted they stared at him, and went suddenly silent, as though disappointed and embarrassed.

The fourth passenger was a girl of perhaps twenty, wearing a ruffled, bustled traveling dress, with a ribboned bonnet set trimly on her tawny hair which was done up in countless glossy ringlets. She was busy tying a bandage over the bullet wound in Wilcey Johnson's arm.

She looked up with interested animation as Wade dismounted, the color running high in her smooth, lightly-tanned cheeks. Then, as she recognized Wade, her smile suddenly chilled. Her gray eyes, wide-spaced and big, became cool and remote. She turned her back on him without speaking.

Even Wilcey Johnson, pale from the shock of his wound, seemed disappointed. He eyed Wade dubiously, before voicing a grudging comment. "Yuh pulled us out of a tight, Delhart," he conceded. "I didn't figger I'd see yuh alive ag'in. It took guts to tackle five of 'em single-handed."

Wade wiped away a trickle of blood, where a rock or bullet fragment had grazed him. "One of 'em's lying back there dead," he stated coldly. "We might as well go back and load him on the stage. The rest of 'em drifted down the country. There's no danger now. I'll drive, if you can't handle the ribbons, Johnson."

So Wade, half an hour later, with his horse tied on a lead rope, and with the body of the dead outlaw on the baggage deck, rolled the stage into Liberty.

Wade climbed down, and stood a little apart from the excited crowd that gathered as the driver and male passengers alighted and began recounting their version of the attempted hold-up. Then the attention of the crowd veered to Wade, and an uncomfortable quiet came over the group. Frowns gathered on the faces of cowmen and punchers. It was as if, instead of saving the stage, they suspected Wade of playing some part on the side of the bandits. Pointedly, the crowd of men about the halted vehicle avoided speaking to Wade.

He turned indifferently away. Once again he encountered the remote stare of the pretty, tawny-haired girl passenger. She stood on the sidewalk with her gloved arm linked through that of a rangy gray-haired, rugged-looking cowman.

The icy hostility in the attitudes of Rose Veach and her sun-cured father, Barney Veach, owner of the powerful Box V ranch, summed up the resentment this cowtown held toward Wade Delhart, and the things he represented.

Sodbuster! That's what their attitudes said, as plainly as though they had jeered it aloud. On the lips of cattle people that always sounded like an epithet, but to Wade Delhart, the terms sodbuster and scissor-bill were names to be proud of.

Wade's gaze wandered along the rambling street, swamped in the yellow mud of the spring thaw. He took in the weather-beaten, warped buildings with their false fronts, and sagging awnings, and he saw the sagging apathy of a community which had changed not at all in thirty years.

Wade Delhart stood there, remote and distant from the crowd. He had the strong, square hands of a ploughman, and the long, stubborn jaw and chin of a fighting man, but his dark eyes held the quiet depths of a dreamer. He was visualizing Liberty town as he believed it would be in another five years. There would be new buildings, a new ambition; activity and commerce! There'd be also the shin-

ing steel rails, and bellow of locomotive whistles. Progress!

Instead of the waste of Idaho flats that stretched endlessly around the town, sparsely dotted with cattle, he pictured an orderly checkerboard of fenced fields, billowing with growing grain and moated with irrigation ditches. For he knew that these things were coming, even though the tall-hatted, domineering cattlemen laughed scornfully at the thought, and made it plain that they would always consider this land as their permanent heritage.

WADE'S face lighted as he turned away from this reflective inspection. A slim, black-haired granger came striding toward him, slapped him violently on the back, and gripped his hand. It was his brother, Johnny. An inch taller than Wade's six feet, and two years younger, Johnny Delhart owned a flashing, winning smile, and a clean-cut boyish personality that made him more popular among the young women of the range than Wade, with his more serious, plodding nature.

"Hail the conquering hero!" Johnny chuckled. "This town don't seem overjoyed to have a sodbuster save their Wells-Fargo box from the bold, bad highwaymen."

Wade grinned. "A sodbuster can do no right and a cowman can do no wrong in this range, Johnny. Let's hit for the homestead. I don't like the smell of this town."

"Any luck in Pocatello, Wade?"

"Yeah. I've got a banker interested in backing a real irrigation district. If we can show him that crops will thrive on Lodestone, he may be willing to back a new dam up in the narrows—a million-dollar dam that would make our dirt dike look like a penny on a blue chip table. It would take care of all the land worth farming on the creek."

Johnny shrugged, "Yuh mean if Barney Veach don't kill or discourage such grangers as are already on the ground! He ain't whipped yet, Wade. Don't get any notion that old rawhider has pulled in his mule ears. He's had a whole winter to think up new ways of making life miserable for us grangers, and he's hiring every tough hand that drifts into the country."

"We coppered every bet he made last summer, feller. We dulled his fangs. We'll continue to raise any bet he makes."

As they headed toward Johnny's horse which was tied up nearby, a buzz of talk around the stage halted them. The body of the outlaw had been lifted down and placed on a stretcher. Sid Haskell, a deputy sheriff who had been peering down at the blanket-covered form, wore a startled look.

Barney Veach on the sidewalk, had turned, staring. Veach's deep voice rolled out sharply. "What's that you said, Sid?"

"Come take a look for yourself, Barney," the officer responded. "This man is Dan Killian. You ought to know that face better than I do. Six years ago it was you an' your punchers that rounded up Link an' Dan Killian an' their outfit an' sent 'em to the pen. The Killians and three of their old outfit busted out of the stay-awhile two months ago durin' that big break. It looks like they've come back to their old stampin' grounds."

Barney Veach went shouldering roughly through the crowd. He stared down at the face of the dead road agent. Slowly he nodded. "Yo're right, Sid. It's Dan Killian."

Johnny nudged Wade excitedly. "That's one of the old Crater Mountain bunch yuh rubbed out, Wade," he breathed. Link an' Dan Killian always swore they'd pay off Barney Veach for sendin' them over the road. They're killers, every one of 'em! Look at Barney Veach! He's chalky aroud the gills. Maybe it wasn't the Wells Fargo box they had in mind when they pulled that stick-

up. Rose Veach was aboard that stage! The chances are they were after the girl in order to get square with Barney!"

CHAPTER TWO

Guns in the Dark

WADE knew the story of the notorious Crater Mountain outlaws. Under the leadership of the Killian brothers, those desperadoes had terrorized half of Idaho, and especially the Liberty country, until the day Barney Veach and his crew ran them to earth.

Barney Veach suddenly came striding toward Wade. "Looks like I got to thank yuh, Delhart," he said slowly. "My daughter was on that stage. I reckon I owe yuh a favor."

It was plain that Barney Veach had swallowed his pride to make that statement.

"The only favor you can do me, Veach," Wade returned coldly. "Is to give honest men a chance to earn an honest living in this country. Lay off the homesteaders."

Barney Veach's seamy face hardened. "That's one thing I'll never promise," he said grimly. "I pioneered this country. Box V cattle have ranged Lodestone Creek for thirty years, and that grass is mine, accordin' to my lights. I won't see it turned into cabbage patches an' corn fields."

"You're blind," Wade returned hotly. "There's room for both cowmen and grangers in this country. One will benefit the other. Settlers will give you a ready market for your beef, and help bring law and order and prosperity. In your heart you know these things, but your fool, stiff-necked cowman code won't let you admit it, Veach. You want to rule —to domineer. But this country is going to be settled in spite of you and your kind. Nothing can stop it."

Barney Veach, without a word, swung on his high heels and went pigeon-toeing away. He took his daughter's arm, helped her into a red-wheeled surrey and picked up the reins.

BARNEY VEACH despised all homesteaders, but particularly did he hate Wade Delhart, for it was Wade who had piloted the first caravan of a dozen settlers into Liberty the previous spring. Cowmen shrugged indifferently when he surveyed claims and located them on Lodestone Creek. They had seen many nesters come and go, starved out and disillusioned by the hot, dry summers and hostile winters. This was cow country, they believed and unfitted for anything else.

But it was not until mid-summer that the cattlemen aroused with a startled, angry snarl as they watched a small reservoir of water spring into existence back of the little dirt dam that Wade and his dozen grangers threw up with Fresno scrapers and mule drags across the lower end of the Beaver Flat swamps.

Irrigation! The cowmen of Liberty range had heard much talk of it, but had paid it only the scant heed a man would give to a chimerical dream. Now the vivid threat of it was thrust squarely in their teeth by this blocky-shouldered, brawny sodbuster whom they had tolerated thus far only because they might enjoy watching his eventual failure.

It was Barney Veach who carried the banner for the cowmen. His range surrounded Lodestone Creek, and Barney Veach personally led the sortie on the Beaver Flat dam. Packing cases of dynamite, Veach and his Box V punchers stepped down from their horses one hot August midnight in the shadow of the ten-foot barrier of dirt and rock, and began punching holes and cutting fuse.

"We'll blow 'er clean over Bear Mountain," Barney Veach chuckled. "Them scabby nesters will get a surprise tonight. There's enough water here tuh wash some of their corn fields clean down intuh the

Snake River gorge. So-long, nesters!"

"An' there's enough powder and slugs in our scatterguns to rip you to pieces," a voice lashed at them from the darkness. "You're covered twelve ways, cowmen. No dynamiting tonight—or any other night. Fill your paws, or lift 'em. The choice is yours." It was Wade Delhart speaking.

The cow crew was trapped. They made out the glint of guns from jutting above rocks and the top of the dam, and heard the soft click as hammers were elevated. Barney Veach was forced to cave. The chances were that if he had been alone he would have fought it out rather than knuckle to these despised plough-pushers, for there was not a trace of fear in his stubborn body, but he could not sacrifice his punchers. He swallowed the bitter pill of surrender, suffering the ignominy of being disarmed and escorted off the homesteads that Wade and Johnny had staked around the site of the dam.

"This ain't the finish," Barney Veach vowed before riding away. "I'll make every hay-pitchin' squatter wish he'd never seen Lodestone Crick or heard the name of Barney Veach."

Barney Veach had tried to keep that promise. His punchers, riding at night, began burning barns and cutting fences, pushing cattle into planted fields to trample and ruin the crops. Grangers were waylaid and beaten up.

Wade Delhart met force with force. He fought three of Veach's biggest and toughest riders, one after another in the middle of Liberty's main street on a Saturday night, and took them to a terrific cleaning. He promised the same medicine for any other man who beat up a Lodestone Creek granger. Armed grangers patroled the fields at night, and two more of Veach's riders soon went to hospitals to be treated for gunshot wounds. That stopped the fence-cutting and barn-burning, and punchers no longer beat up farmers.

The homesteaders were still clinging to their claims when winter came. It was a tough winter, and Barney Veach and other ranchers were too busy staving off blizzard disaster to bother with homesteaders. That enforced truce had lasted so many months that Wade had begun to hope that it was permanent, but the unyielding pride and arrogance in the attitude of Barney Veach and his daughter there on this April day of the attempted stage stick-up showed him his error.

Young Johnny Delhart watched the slim, daintily-clad girl as she rode out of Liberty, with her father handling the matched team of water-marked sorrels. "She's beautiful," he muttered. "Pretty as a picture."

Wade saw the rapt admiration in his brother's dark eyes. He frowned. "She's not your kind, Johnny," he said curtly. "She thinks sodbusters are only dirt under her feet. There'll be plenty of girls in this country soon. After we prove that crops will pay here, settlers will pour in."

Johnny Delhart shrugged, and there was a shadow of protest and doubt in his lean, bronzed face as he rode with Wade up the muddy north trail that wound through the monotonous waste of sage swells.

Johnny had not heard a friendly word, except from the homesteaders on the creek, nor had he spoken to a comely girl in nearly a year. He looked at the silvery sage almost with hatred, and watched the surrey swing off the main trail ahead, rolling toward the Box V headquarters spread among the locust and cottonwood trees off to the west, some five miles out of town.

The tracery of corrals and ranch buildings vanished behind them as the brothers rode on to the homestead locations on upper Lodestone Creek. Wade's eyes lighted as they came in view of the farms. Smoke curled from the chimneys of a dozen soddies that looked like toys set down among cleared fields. Strips of

greening wheat contrasted with the black squares of newly ploughed forties. Beyond, in the April sunset, glinted the stored reservoir behind the low dirt dike. The sod houses Johnny and Wade had built stood close to either end of the dam like watch houses.

"There's just about enough water to carry the dozen of us through this year," Wade observed. "Once we prove that crops will pay, capital will come in and build a big dam. It's a sure thing."

Johnny did not respond to Wade's enthusiasm. He was still thinking of a trim, gray-eyed girl riding proudly in a red-wheeled ranch surrey.

CHAPTER THREE

Pride of a Sodbuster

WADE was working on a lister plough in the late sunlight of the April day. The smell of moist earth and bursting buds was like a tonic in the air, and he was eager to come to grips with the soil again. He had visited all of the neighboring homesteaders, and they had listened eagerly to his story of new settlers and the interest of the bankers at Pocatello. And just now he was especially remembering the shining hope which was reflected in the faces of Chris and Aunt Hulda Schneider.

The Schneiders were typical of the dozen farmers on the creek. They had been grasshoppered out of Kansas and droughted out of the Nebraska sandhills. This Idaho land venture was their last gamble.

The ageing Schneiders looked to Wade's youthful vigor and ambition to carry them through, as did all of the other grangers. He had been their strong bulwark against the wrath of the cattlemen, inspiring and leading them. Except for his wilful fighting spirit they would have been driven out of the Lodestone in the first summer, and they knew it.

Wade felt his responsibility, as he set the blades of the lister plough. Absorbed in his work he did not know that he had a visitor until a shadow fell across the soft sunlit earth before him.

He came to his feet sharply and looked into the eyes of Rose Veach! She stood there with a remote little smile that was in sharp contrast to the patent hostility she had showed him in town the previous day. Wearing a canvas-faced saddle jacket, and a heavy riding skirt that came just to the tops of her star-topped half-boots, she made a disturbing picture. She swung her hat in her hand, and seemed to know that the sun in her hair added to its rich tawny texture. Her horse stood ground-tied before the house.

"I'm afraid I forgot my manners yesterday, Mister Delhart," she said demurely. "I rode this way to make amends. I want to think you for routing those highwaymen. It was very brave of you."

"Thank you," Wade returned curtly. He had seen Rose Veach many times in town or on the trails, but had never spoken to her. Her haughty hostility of the past still rankled, and now, remembering it, he was suspicious of her real motives, but he could not help appreciating her sheer attractiveness.

She looked at the plough, smiling. "Do you push it or pull it?" she asked. "And is it hard to handle when it's fresh in from winter range?"

"Like all things, it depends on the man who does the handling," he returned.

She appraised him coolly. "And some men are also difficult to handle," she said bluntly. "You'd make a good cattleman, Wade Delhart. Why not go into cattle? There's only failure for you in trying to farm this range. You'll have a future in cattle. Dad will stake you to a start in a brand."

Wade eyed her cynically. "Having learned he can't scare us away, Barney Veach sends you to try to buy us off,"

he said. "I couldn't take that offer, even if it was put in good faith. I brought those other homesteaders in. They expect me to stick with them to the finish."

Her firm little chin lifted to meet his scorn. "That offer *was* put in good faith," she returned grimly. "You have some qualities that dad admires. You're game, and you're loyal. These things aren't easy to find in men. These other homesteaders will stick with you as long as you bear the brunt of the fighting for them. But they'll turn tail and leave you to stand alone the instant things turn against them."

"You're wrong," he said determinedly. "Some day you'll learn that it's the truth."

"Is that a threat? You mentioned that things would turn against us."

She looked him squarely in the eyes. "Merely a statement of fact. We've just begun to fight, Delhart. We will never turn our range, or any part of it, over to grangers. If you people stay here, it will mean a land rush. Fools will overrun the country with their dry-farming and their ploughs. And most of them will starve. They'll leave after a year or two, and they'll leave this land a desert, not fit for either cattle or farmers. It's happened before."

"That won't be allowed to happen," Wade conceded. "Comparatively little of this land can be farmed successfully."

"We don't intend to take the chance," she stated slowly. "You grangers have got to get out before it's too late. We'll do everything in our power to smash you, Delhart. We'll use every weapon we can lay hands upon to clear this land of farmers."

Wade nodded grimly. "That's plain enough. I'm ready. Go back to your father and tell him to turn his wolf loose."

She wheeled proudly to return to her horse. Then she paused as Wade's brother came in sight, driving the harrow team. Johnny Delhart halted, and Wade saw a wistful longing leap into his young eyes as he stared at Rose Veach.

"This is my brother, Johnny," Wade said stiffly. "Miss Veach."

Johnny rubbed his palms together, and touched a finger to his unruly mass of dark hair. Tall, supple and bronzed, his jeans stuffed into his cow hide boots, with his cotton shirt loose and open on his chest, he made Wade think of a lusty young god who had just sprung from the soil.

Rose Veach walked toward Johnny, offering her hand, and she was smiling up at him. Wade's eyes narrowed. He could have slapped her in that instant. He saw the flame that was burning brighter in Johnny's eyes, and he knew that the girl was noticing it too.

She headed toward her horse again, but Johnny followed. "Yuh didn't ride here alone?" he questioned.

"Why not? It's only fifteen miles or so."

"But—but what about Li—" Johnny blurted out, then paused uncertainly.

She laughed lightly. "You were going to mention the name of Link Killian, weren't you? I quit believing in goblins when I gave up wearing pigtails. Some people think Link Killian and his gang were trying to kidnap me yesterday when they held up the stage. But that's ridiculous. They couldn't possibly have known I was aboard. They were only after the Wells Fargo box."

"I'm going to see you safely back home anyway," Johnny said firmly. "Wait until I saddle up."

Rose Veach laughed gaily. "I've found what boogey-men are good for at last. They give a girl an excuse to accept the services of a dashing escort. I'm accepting your offer, Johnny Delhart. Fifteen miles is a long way to ride alone. I grew mighty tired of my own company on the trail over here. String leather on your

fiery steed, my cavalier, and we'll fare forth together."

Wade said nothing as he went back to his work on the lister plough. From beneath thick, pinched brows he watched them ride away. Rose Veach held her horse close at Johnny's side, and she was talking vivaciously. Wade threw aside his file, and swore softly. . . .

It was nearly midnight when Johnny returned and put up his horse. Wade awakened, and listened to the light-hearted song Johnny was humming softly as he turned in. Half sleepily Wade realized it was a love-song . . . .

THE days of spring planting came, and Johnny did his share in the fields, but his interest in farming was gone. Twice a week he rode away at sundown to call on Rose Veach at the Box V. More than once Wade wanted to tell him what a fool he was making of himself, as he kept remembering the flat declaration of war which Rose Veach had so bluntly handed him. He suspected that she was bewitching Johnny in the hope of using him for her own purposes. But he was frequently puzzled when Johnny returned from his trips to the Box V downcast and morose.

"Playing with him, stringing him along —and he guesses it," Wade reflected bitterly, and more than once he was on the point of riding over there and telling her what he thought of a girl who would purposely break the heart of a decent, hard-working kid like Johnny.

With spring planting finished, green shoots pushed above the harrowed field. Corn and beans grew like magic as May advanced into June. By mid-June the corn was stirrup high. Chris Schneider with eighty acres in wheat, was wild with enthusiasm over his prospects. All other crops promised bumper yields.

First irrigation from the little Beaver Dam reservoir in June was the occasion for a celebration. The grangers, only three of whom were married, gathered at Wade's place that night for a barbecue and dance, to commemorate the success of the irrigation system which he had surveyed and engineered.

Uncle Billy Roscoe, wizened, plough-calloused Tennessean, who with his wife and a sixteen-year-old son were gambling for a stake in this new country, brought his concertina, and the grangers cleared the dirt floor of the wagon shed for a dance.

Only one of their number was missing. Johnny Delhart had ridden away before sundown to call on Rose Veach.

Wade was swinging the plump, giggling wife of Jake Tipton to the strains of *Money Musk,* when silence came over the dancers. Uncle Billy's concertina broke rhythm, then resumed uncertainly. Wade turned.

Johnny was entering the lighted shed, with a half defiant, and half exultant smile. On his arm was Rose Veach, wearing a simple print gingham frock enhancing her clear beauty.

The significance of it struck the grangers then, like a sudden, unexpected blow. Here among them, escorted by a sodbuster, was the daughter of the man who had sworn to crush them out of existence! It carried only one meaning to the farmers. Peace! Barney Veach must have knuckled to the inevitable. A wild cheer arose.

Johnny, flushed and grinning, brought her among them, voicing introductions. Then Rose Veach, cool and composed, was swept away into a dance in the bear-like grip of the overjoyed Chris Schneider.

Only Wade stood back. Rose Veach's glance touched him as she swung lightly over the dirt floor, while the concertina went mad in Uncle Billy's joyful hands. She looked away quickly, but she left with Wade an impression of brooding thoughts under her outward gaiety.

Wade left the barn and strolled out

alone under the star-studded quiet sky. At a distance he rolled a smoke under the starlight, the mood of the celebration gone from him. He watched the shadows of the dancers whirling past the lantern-lit doorway as man after man partnered Rose Veach. He wondered if it was true that the fight was won at last.

That possibility brought a strange reaction. For a year he had been keyed up, tuned to this task, working, planning and fighting, checking every move the cowmen made with counter-check. Now he suddenly felt let-down at loose ends. It occurred to him that it was not victory as much as the fighting that he valued. That brought an ironic smile to his lips. He called himself a granger, abhorring the term of "fighting man". Yet deep in his heart he suddenly conceded that he loved the conflict, struggle and turmoil of an odds-on fight.

A hand touched his arm lightly and he looked up. Rose Veach stood there beside him. Her straight mouth, with its full red underlip, was alluring in the reflected lantern glow from the barn. "You haven't danced with me," she said slowly. "Do you dislike cow-folks that much?"

Wade hesitated, then led her to the floor. She was as light as gossamer in his arms, pliable to his every move. They danced in silence. Once again he vaguely sensed that deep within her was turmoil, a conflict of character that she wanted no one to see.

She looked up at him when the music stopped. "I'll always remember that dance," she remarked, and her voice was so low Wade barely heard it. She walked away then, leaving him puzzled, and asked Johnny to take her home.

JOHNNY proudly squired her as she rode away on her smart red roan into the midnight starlight, bound for the Box V ranch fifteen miles to the south. Wade stood frowning after them. He was thinking of Link Killian, the escaped desperado, who was still at large. It was common knowledge that Barney Veach had hired some more gun-hands to guard himself and his daughter. Evidently Rose Veach had evaded her bodyguard for this lark among the grangers.

According to range gossip, Link Killian and his followers had readily dropped back into their old ways. Two stages had been held up since their first failure when Wade routed them. A cattleman, carrying a poke of beef money, had been found murdered and robbed not far from Liberty only three days before. The Crater Mountain outlaws were riding again, and Sid Haskell and his posse found only blind trails that vanished in the weird wasteland of jagged craters and volcanic formation that guarded Crater Mountain more than one hundred miles to the north.

Standing there alone in the shadows, an intuitive uneasiness seemed to chill Wade, but he shrugged it away. He stood there for a long time, a dead quirlie dangling from his lips, while the dancing went on. Then, with a start, he realized that his thoughts were dwelling on Rose Veach. The memory of her nearness when she had danced in his arms lingered vividly, and now that she was gone he was aware of a sudden emptiness in the celebration.

He headed impatiently back to the dance, but before he reached the door, a wild-eyed, panting figure raced out of the darkness. It was Johnny, matted with dust, and soaked to his knees from wading the creek on foot.

Johnny's voice was thick and unnatural. "They got her!" he choked. "Killian, an' his outfit. Roped me from the saddle, left me tied up, and rode away with her!"

He frenziedly grasped Wade's shirt. "Didn't you hear? It's Rose! Link Killian's kidnaped her! They took my gun, hog-tied me, but I worked free. I'm goin' after 'em."

"Easy, Johnny," Wade snapped. "Where did it happen?"

"Not a mile down the trail. In God's name, Wade, don't stand there talkin'. We've got to get her before that snake . . ."

Johnny's voice broke pitifully, and he was shaking and near collapse.

"How do you know it was Killian?" Wade snapped.

"Heard one of them call him by name, an' heard Killian himself say that this would make Barney Veach sweat plenty."

Wade strode into the shed, and halted the dance. "Link Killian has just kidnaped Rose Veach," he said swiftly. "They roped Johnny off his horse, and took her with 'em. We've got to head 'em off before they get into the lava beds. That's where they'll make for."

He singled out Tad Roscoe, the stripling son of Uncle Billy. "Pile your pony, Tad, and cut the wind to the Box V. Tell Barney Veach what's happened, an' let him know we're taking the trail without waiting for him. You might not find him at the ranch. The Box V has been roundin' up over along the Folded Hills, and might be there yet. At any rate, we can't wait for them."

The grangers were looking at each other dubiously. "I ain't got no ridin' horse," one of them, Jake Tipton, murmured. "Me an' the wife come here in the wagon. Anyway, I can't leave my farm now. Got a forty of corn tuh git in before—"

"Damn your corn!" Wade exploded. "A girl has been stolen by the scaliest snakes in the country! And what's more, she was stolen in our territory. You can ride one of your wagon team, Tipton. I'll trade off saddles with you from time to time."

A few more had excuses ready, but they did not have the courage to voice them as they saw Wade's angry scorn. Even Chris Schneider rode with them on a harness-marked plough horse as they swept away at Wade's heels. Only the wives of Christ Schneider, Jake Tipton and Uncle Billy Roscoe were left behind. Under the circumstances Wade did not consider it necessary to leave the usual armed guard over the dam.

At the point where Johnny had been piled from his horse, they picked up the trail of five riders. By the light of lanterns they followed it across the creek, and northward. It was maddeningly slow work in the darkness.

"Making a bee-line north for their old hide-out in the lava," Wade at last observed. "Never mind bothering to cut sign. We'll fog it, and pick up their trail at daylight. We know where they're heading!"

THEY were thirty miles north of Lodestone Creek at early dawn. Wade cut the trail of their quarry in less than twenty minutes of quartering, and he studied it with a frown. The wind had dulled the edges of the hoof marks. Beetles and crickets had marked their own tiny trails in the depressions.

"They're two hours or more ahead of us right now," Wade declared. "They picked up a relay of horses somewhere. These ponies were fresh—an' travelin' faster than we are."

Their own mounts began to show the effects of the pace during the morning, and the trail they followed became colder. At noon they were forced to rest their animals. The lava beds were still forty miles away and Crater Mountain lay low on the horizon. Johnny Delhart, his eyes live coals, his face drawn and bitter, cursed the delay and wildly paced the camp.

After two hours they pushed on. The purple line of lava ridges took form with mocking deliberation as the day waned, and they were only on the outskirts of the Crater Mountain country when darkness forced them to camp.

They hit the saddle again before dawn, and pushed their gaunted horses on into an up-ended chaos of gray and black lava. The sun swung up, assailing them with a dry, blinding intensity that was magnified by the barren tumult of rock. Then the trail they had followed nearly one hundred miles utterly vanished on flinty areas of black slag. They quartered, but failed to find it again in this increasing labyrinth of cones and craters and corkscrew gorges.

From a high ridge they looked back over the sage swells to the south, expecting to sight Barney Veach and his Box V riders racing to their help. But their back trail was deserted.

The grangers were as tired as their jaded horses. Several of them had been grumbling among themselves during the morning. Their discontent broke out openly now.

"What the hell!" one of them, a Missourian named Jim Lownes, spat. "If Veach ain't interested enough in his daughter tuh hit the trail why should we fret about it? After all, it's Veach's fight. I'm in favor o' turnin' back. Another day of this an' I'll be afoot. My hawss is tuckered, an' I can't afford to lose him. He's my best work animal."

There were nods of approval. Wade hipped around, and eyed them with contempt. "We're not valuing horse flesh above a girl's safety," he snapped. "Are you men or yellow cowards? The chances are that Tad Roscoe wasn't able to locate Veach and his round-up camp in a hurry. They'll be along pretty soon now. In the meantime, it's up to us."

They continued the search but they were sullen, and their black looks in Wade's direction increased as the day of futile, weary searching dragged on. Their quarry seemed to have been swallowed by the tangled wasteland of craters and rust-colored ridges. Except for buzzards, and the frequent mottled slither of rattlers they saw no sign of life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Johnny Rides Out

THEY ate their last strip of salt pork, and opened the last air-tights of tomatoes in the camp they made on a brackish pool the second night. Jim Lownes and Jake Tipton were preaching open rebellion.

"This h'yar's a wild-goose chase," Lownes snarled. "Me an' Jake are headin' home at sunup, Delhart. We got ploughed fields dryin' out, an' the late corn waitin' to be listed in. Our horses are stove up, so that they won't be fit to harness fer a week. We're goin' back."

An immediate growl of agreement went up. Wade and Johnny found themselves standing alone.

"Jim's right," Uncle Billy Roscoe whined. "I reckon I better be gittin' back to the place. It's certain that we'll never do no good pokin' around this hell-hole. I don't figger it's up to us tuh pull Barney Veach's burned ches'nuts out'n the fire. We don't owe him nothin'."

Wade looked them over in disgust. "Go back to your damn corn patches, then," he spat. "Johnny an' I are stayin' here until we find something."

Wade and Johnny watched the ten of them ride away on their tired horses at dawn, heading south out of the lava. "Gutless lizards," Johnny spat. "No backbone. They're not worth what you've done for 'em, Wade. You brought 'em into this range, located 'em, fought for 'em and protected 'em. You gave them their chance at a real start. You see how quick they quit yuh when the goin' gets tough?"

Wade said nothing. He was recalling the prophecy Rose Veach had made about the character of the grangers.

He and Johnny rode deeper into the malpais on their tired horses, with their

belt buckles pinching into their lean, hungry bellies. It was late afternon when Wade, walking now to save his horse, bent down and looked at the trail of shod hoofs in volcanic sand at his feet. He beckoned Johnny, who came racing down from a ridge.

"Found it," he said briefly. "These are the same animals we trailed into the lava. But the sign is two days old."

With revived strength they puzzled out that cold trail, losing it time and again on flinty surfaces, then quartering and picking it up again in the ash and talus of the draws. It swung roughly westward for five miles, but as darkness came, forcing them to camp, their course had definitely swung southward.

Wade sat frowning as they tried to satisfy their hunger with a bitter concoction made by reboiling the previous day's coffee grounds. The failure of Barney Veach and his punchers to show up weighed upon him, and the southward trend of this trail aroused a strange puzzlement in his mind.

Another dawn, and they resumed the trail. A cottontail, mangled by one of Wade's .45 slugs, appeased their starved appetites somewhat during the morning, but Wade's frown deepened, and Johnny had grown puzzled and silent. For the trail was still pulling them southward.

Before noon they emerged from the lava beds into the open sage, at a point only some ten miles east from where they had entered the malpais three days previously. They pulled up, looking at each other, then at the wind-dimmed hoofmarks, that pointed straight out into the sage southward.

"I don't savvy it," Wade muttered. "We've swung in a circle. It looks like they backtracked after shakin' us off in the lava. But they wouldn't take a chance of headin' out into the open country, knowin' that they'd likely bump into Veach comin' up with his punchers."

They followed that puzzling trail. It brought them back the next noon within sight of the sprawling Box V spread near Liberty town. They paused their horses at a distance in the shelter of brush along the little creek. They could plainly see the girl who was sitting on the deep veranda of the log-built old ranch house, a basket of knitting in her lap.

It was Rose Veach!

Half a dozen punchers were in sight, working with the horses, or lolling around the bunkhouse. All were armed. Bodyguards! Johnny started to voice his amazement, but Wade halted him with a gesture.

"Let's head for the flats," he said, a queer look on his face.

IT was past noon when they came in sight of their farms. Gaunt, dust-caked, half-starved, with a stubble of black beard filming their jaws, they halted, staring like stricken men at a scene of ruin.

The two-mile sweep of cleared fields looked as if a tornado had swept it clean. Sod houses had been pulled down, and frame barns and wagon sheds were only cold heaps of charred embers.

The fields of winter wheat which had been heading up, and billowing waist high five days previously, were flat and trampled into the earth. Corn and bean fields showed the same dismal face. Fences were down everywhere. Five thousand head of cattle had been trailed back and forth across the homesteads during their absence, but now the destructive agency was gone, scattered again over the customary cattle range to the east and west.

All that remained of the dam that had been built so laboriously the previous summer was a gaping, dynamite-torn fragment, with a muddy swamp beyond it drying in the sun. The racing flood of released water had swept the top soil from the richest land on the homesteads Johnny and Wade held around and below the dam. Wade's sod house was the only structure

left standing on the flats. It perched on the brink of a new, ugly gully that the flood had gouged ten feet to bed rock.

Wade's square face was rock-hard. "Rose Veach wasn't kidnaped by Link Killian," he intoned. "It was a frame-up, Johnny. Probably it was her own father and his riders that night who faked themselves as Killian's bunch for your benefit. We were tricked into going on a false scent. We left our land unprotected, and even the dam. This explains why no Box V rider ever showed up to help us. She was safe at the ranch. It was a neat trap, and I fell into it!"

Johnny Delhart uttered a dry, mocking laugh, bitter with self reproach and humiliation. "And I thought I loved her," he frothed. "Damn her for a double-crossin', cheatin'—"

"I'm the one you ought to cuss," Wade snapped impatiently. "She warned me. She told me she'd use every weapon she could lay hands on to ruin us. She only kept her word."

"Are you standin' up for her—after the way she made a sucker out of me?" Johnny panted.

"She at least gave me fair notice to keep my eyes open. That's more than most cow people would have done. Don't forget that the Box V has a big stake in this game. They believe they face ruin, and they think they're in the right as much as we do. We crowded into their range, invited trouble. When you ask for war there's no use crying when they take you up on it."

"I never did understand you, Wade," Johnny said helplessly. "Don't yuh savvy that this is the finish? We're licked."

"Not yet, we ain't!" Wade snapped.

They rode down into the flats. Jim Lownes was listlessly digging into the ruins of his sod shack, salvaging what he could and piling it on his flat-bed, lynch-pin wagon. He eyed them sullenly as they pulled up.

"Where you goin', Jim?" Wade asked quietly.

"Pullin' out," the Missourian growled. "What else is there for a man tuh do? I've slaved here for a year, grubbed sage-brush, an' sunk my last cent in seed an' tools. Where is it now? Gone because you fell fer a petticoat an' a purty face. I hold you to blame for this, Delhart."

"The land is still here," Wade argued. "We'll throw up another dam. Next year we'll harvest what we plant. I'll get money for seed and new tools. I'll borrow, beg or steal it!"

"You kin have it. I'm pullin' out. Yuh can't beat these cowmen. They own the country. Everybody knows that Barney Veach done this. They moved in the night we went on that fool trip to Crater. Masked punchers put the three women on a wagon, an' headed 'em toward town. They can't identify none of 'em. Nobody else seen what happened. It was all over an' even the cattle that tromped down our fields was gone before any of us got back. The sheriff laughed at us when we talked about makin' charges. We ain't got a shred of proof that a jury or a judge owned by cattle people would recognize."

"Where are the rest of the boys?" Wade asked.

Jim Lownes mounted his wagon and kicked off the brake.

"Pulled out yisterday. It's all your'n now, Delhart. You kin build yore dam, an' fight yore cowmen to yore heart's content. The rest of us have had enough of you an' yore big talk about progress, million dollar dams an' prosperity!"

Then Jim Lownes drove away.

JOHNNY cleared his throat to speak, then thought better of it. In silence they rode to Wade's little sod house. Wade wondered why they had spared his house. He looked at the water-torn fields and trampled crops and the muddy mound

that had once been a dam. In the twilight the place had the silence and dismal aspect of a graveyard—a place of buried hope.

They prepared a meal and ate like starved wolves. Wade at last broke the silence. "I'll go down to Pocatello and round up more settlers. I'll pick men who still stick to a finish this time."

Johnny's eyes shifted around uneasily. "There's no use rammin' a stone wall, Wade," he muttered. "We're licked. We might as well admit it. Nobody will come in here after hearing about this."

"Good God, Johnny, you're not quitting me, too?"

Johnny arose impatiently. "I wasn't cut out to be a sodbuster," he burst out. "I hate the work. Twelve hours a day, week after week, month after month. I'm ridin' out of this damned range in the mornin'. I'm slantin for Montana or Nevada or Oregon—any place where they don't know I'm a hoe-man. I'm goin' to hire out as a rider for some cow outfit. I want to see somethin' else besides a furrow, an' the back end of a plough team."

"You don't mean that, Johnny."

"I mean it, Wade. An' you'll be smart if you see it my way and ride out with me."

Wade's jaws set grimly. "I'm staying," he said softly. "I won't let Barney Veach an' his smart daughter run me out."

CHAPTER FIVE

Killers' Hostage

JOHNNY rode away the next morning after a restrained farewell and a brief handclasp. Wade's throat tightened as he watched Johnny's slim body become jaunty once he passed beyond the cleared fields. It was as though a weight had lifted from Johnny's shoulders.

Wade still could not believe Johnny meant to quit him. He kept expecting his brother to turn back, but Johnny rode on into the sage swells to the south, and was swallowed by the haze of distance.

Wade was left alone, the last of the Lodestone Creek grangers, and monarch of a ruined, trampled kingdom. He thought of Barney Veach, and his hand touched his scuffed gun-holster. Coolly he weighed the value of a gun showdown. A bullet was one way of paying off Barney Veach, but that age-old method never had really solved a difficulty.

Wade or Barney Veach or both of them might die, if he came up smoking at the Box V, but the real issue would linger after their passing. Cowmen would still claim their divine right to this range. They would hold sodbusters in scorn, and bully and brow-beat them, refusing to accept them on an equal footing.

Clearly Wade saw that it was pride that drove him onward now. He had never forgotten the insolent scorn in the gray eyes of Rose Veach that day on the stage trail. Again his stubborn jaws clamped. Some day, he vowed, a farmer would walk the streets of Liberty on equal footing with cowmen. Some day the term sodbuster would not sound like an epithet in this country.

Guns were not the immediate solution. Later maybe, but pride was the stake now. Wade hitched up a team, and began ploughing. That was his answer to the forces that had undone the fruits of a year's toil. He broke soil on a field he had reserved for late corn, throwing into the task the energy of a determined, desperate man. There would be water enough, ditched from the dwindling creek, to care for twenty acres of corn. At least there would be one patch of greenery in the flats to challenge the supremacy of the cowman.

He knocked off at sundown. He fed and watered the team in the warm twilight, then stripped to the waist and splashed and sputtered, in the tingling cold water at the pump trough.

As he began toweling himself dry, he

turned. There, sitting her horse a dozen paces away was Rose Veach. He could not see the details of her face in the evening shadows, but her manner as she dismounted was grave and steady. There was no apology or diffidence in her.

Wade laid aside the towel, drew on his shirt. "You kept your word," he spoke slowly. "You ruined people who had put in a year of their lives in this place. You broke the heart of a good boy who had fallen in love with you."

"I am not proud of the methods I used," she returned quietly. "But it was better than the bloodshed that was sure to come. My father was preparing to drive you out with gunpowder and bullets. He would have done it, too. My way was better."

She paused, and he saw the tightness of her slim body, the strain that gripped her. "I didn't break Johnny's heart," she added. "He did not love me. He was infatuated at first, I suppose, but it never was love. I made it plain to him from the start that I would never hold any love for him. He's decent, and clean, and I like him. But he's young and lighthearted, and within a week he will have forgotten me. There are many girls in the world for Johnny Delhart."

"You used him to ruin his friends."

"No, to save them," she corrected. "I admit that, and I will always hate myself for doing it. But the end justified the means. The grangers are leaving here with money in their pockets. They're leaving here alive. That's what counts."

"Money?" Wade questioned.

"Dad gave each of them five hundred dollars," she said simply. "That's all we could afford. We're not as rich as people believe. We were hard hit last winter, and this threat of a land rush has hurt our credit. We're mortgaged at a ridiculously low figure. The Box V's value went down when you came in, Delhart."

"Why did you come here today?"

She was silent a long time. "I don't know," she confessed. "Unless it was to show that I'm not afraid to face you after what I did. I knew I'd find you here. I knew you wouldn't quit. That's why I made dad promise to leave your house untouched."

"You're right," Wade snapped, "I'm not quitting! Go back an' tell your dad that my fence lines are deadline for him and his riders. Tell him I'll bring more settlers in, and that the dam will be rebuilt and more crops planted next year!"

He motioned toward her horse. "You had better ride now. I'll saddle up, an' see you safely back. Link Killian's still at large, though it looks like you've used him also as nothing more than a tool for your own purposes. Just to play safe I'll make sure the boogey-man doesn't get you."

"I'm not afraid," she said wearily, and mounted. "You needn't put yourself out, Delhart. I'm sorry about—about many things. If you ever change your mind about cattle and cattlemen there'll be a job for you at the Box V. We could use a range boss. Some day there will be a partnership awaiting the right man. Dad's growing old and the ranch is too big for him to handle."

"Still trying to bribe me, eh?" Wade returned curtly.

"I—I don't want you to fight my dad," she burst out, suddenly close to tears. "Do you think I want to see you killed?"

She whirled her horse to ride away. And as though that was a signal that released a rush of movement, shadowy men who had crept up behind the house, raced into view.

Rose Veach screamed as one of the intruders snatched her from the saddle. . .

THE remaining three came charging on Wade, and he saw their guns raised to club him down. The attack had come

without warning and with lightning speed. Wade took one stride toward his gun which hung on the pump, then saw that he could not make it. He wheeled as they swarmed upon him.

He drove a fist into the face of one man, sending him reeling, and he avoided the smash of a gun muzzle in the hands of another, dealing a short chopping punch to the jaw as the gun crashed numbingly on his shoulder. But he could not avoid the third man in time, and the barrel of a six-shooter crashed on his skull. He went to his knees with his muscles turning soggy. A second blow flattened him, and the world was dark and spinning sickeningly in his brain.

Arms pinned him down. A fist drove into his face, and he was kicked savagely in the ribs. A croaking voice cursed with murderous fury. Vaguely he saw a cocked six-shooter shoved at him. Its muzzle touched his forehead, and the stark realization came that he was on the brink of death.

Then the gun was pushed away by another man. "Hold 'er, Link," a rough voice protested. "Not here. It'll be easier to pack him with us alive."

"Damn him," that thick frog-like voice wheezed. "He flattened my nose. Bust it, with thet punch he threw. I'll cut his heart out!"

"Keep your hair on. We need him for awhile. Don't forget that slick scheme you cooked up. After we're through with him you'll have plenty of time to work him over."

That counsel prevailed. Wade's hands were tied, and someone threw a bucket of cold water over him. That revived him somewhat, and they jerked him to his feet. He saw that Rose Veach was a prisoner, struggling futilely in the grasp of one of them.

In the fading dusk Wade made out the ragged garb and hard, whiskery faces of their four captors. One of them nursed a bloody, broken nose, and this one again hit Wade in the face, cursing him, promising vengeance to come.

"I'll make yuh sorry yuh ever bumped into Link Killian, sodbuster," the man panted.

"Link Killian!" Wade echoed, and then shot a quick, grim glance at Rose Veach.

"The real article this time, farmer. I noticed the way you jest looked at the piece of calico. I reckon both of you are smart enough to savvy why I'm here. I heard how Barney Veach run a sandy on you, Delhart, by framin' a kidnapin'. He used my name as the one who stole the gal. I figured I might as well have the game as the name—so I been waitin' my chance to take you both into camp. This was my lucky day. I got both of yuh at one swoop!" Link Killian chuckled.

LINK KILLIAN turned and bowed mockingly to Rose Veach. "I've got your dad to thank for this idea. I reckon you're worth something on the hoof to him. How much cash do yuh reckon Barney Veach will pay to save yore pretty little life?"

"Not a cent," Rose Veach panted.

Killian laughed harshly and stroked her hair which had fallen loose during her struggle to escape. "Maybe I won't sell yuh at any price," he growled. "You're a mighty neat little filly."

"I'm not afraid of you, Killian," the girl responded, and Wade felt a sudden warming elation at her courage. "My father will never pay ransom to you. He'll trail you down, just as he did once before, and he'll hang you for this. You better let us go now—at once."

"It ain't Link Killian he'll hunt as your kidnaper, little one," the desperado sneered. "I took another leaf from Barney Veach's book. I'm settin' up a blind trail that won't ever lead to me."

"What do you mean?"

Killian was boastfully proud of him-

self. "There's two men in this group with a grudge against Barney Veach. I'm one of 'em, and the other man that owes your dad somethin' is this sodbuster, Wade Delhart. Delhart was ruined by that smart frame-up you and your dad pulled on the nesters. I'm goin' to let Delhart have the honor of being known as your kidnaper."

Wade spoke up curtly. "You haven't been hitting the pipe, have you Killian?"

Killian slapped him brutally. "You'll be smart if yuh keep your mouth shut, Delhart. Follow orders, an' save yourself some misery. I ain't forgot this busted nose you handed me a few minutes ago, and I remember that you killed my brother the day we stopped the stage from Pocatello."

Horses were brought up. Wade and the girl were lifted into saddles, and tied there with rawhide thongs, knotted so that they would not yield.

She looked at Wade as they rode side by side, surrounded by Link Killian, and his three companions. "Retribution," she said quietly. "Caught by my own trap. Killian might not have thought of kidnaping me if he hadn't heard about the scheme I used against you, Wade Delhart. It would be easier on me if you hadn't been caught also, because they mean to kill us both sooner or later. I can see it in their faces. Your death will be on my conscience. And I've tried so hard to —to keep you out of harm's way."

Wade leaned toward her as far as his bonds would permit. A wild exhilaration had rushed through him. "You don't hate all sodbusters," he told her tensely. "That's the truth, isn't it."

She looked at him, but did not answer. "You're the gamest girl I've ever known," Wade went on.

He could see the parting of her lips, and he knew that she was smiling—smiling when she faced a fate that made Wade turn cold with sheer horror. "I'll always remember that," she breathed.

"We're not dead yet," Wade gritted. "More than ever I want to live—now. I haven't ever talked to you, and I want to talk to you a plenty. Don't blame yourself for this—or for anything."

Jake Killian shoved them apart then with a curse. They were not permitted to talk to each other again.

The outlaws did not head for the Crater Mountain country. Crowding their horses they pushed westward, crossing the low line of the gentle mountains called the Folded Hills.

DAWN was near at hand when they turned up the rocky gorge of a small creek. The horses picked their way slowly in single file along a talus of boulders and loose rubble, then walked along a gravel beach at the base of rock walls reaching a sheer fifty feet above them.

They dismounted in a cave-like overhang at the toe of the gorge wall. Horses and men were hidden from view of any searcher who might happen to peer from the rims above.

A long barrier of brush and gunnysacks had been built across the inner depth of the overhang which cut off any betraying gleam of the fire that was built. Wade and the girl were lifted from their horses and marched to the fire.

The camp showed long occupancy. Two broken Wells Fargo boxes served as seats. Knife-slit mail pouches were lying around, and the rock underfooting was littered with letters that had been opened and thrown aside.

From the conversation he had overheard during the ride to the hideout Wade understood that the outlaws had made little profit from their recent hold-ups. He also learned that their first stick-up that day on the Pocatello road had not been a kidnaping attempt. The express box had been the sole objective. Killian and his followers, fresh from the prison from

which they had escaped, were unaware of the identity of the girl passenger on the stage.

Rose Veach cast a tragic glance at Wade when she heard that. It was further proof that her own false kidnaping scheme had been Killian's sole inspiration for her present predicament.

She stood beside Wade, her shoulder touching his arm. In the firelight they got their first real look at the Crater Mountain bunch, and it was not reassuring. Link Killian, with his hatchet face and his matted, coarse graying hair, and little, malevolent eyes, fitted the evil reputation he bore. The other three varied in age and size, but they were cast in the same ruthless mold.

Killian searched among the discarded pieces of mail, and found a blank sheet of white paper. He placed it on one of the express boxes, and untied Wade's right hand. Handing him a stubby pencil he pointed at the paper. "Write what I tell yuh, Delhart," he growled. "You can begin it this way," he decided. "'Your daughter is still alive, an' unharmed. Git fifty thousand dollars ready, gold money, an' wait fer further orders.' Then sign yore name to it, Delhart."

Rose Veach uttered a gasp of anger. Killian's scheme to cover his part in the kidnaping was very likely to work. Wade had an incentive for asking ransom as vengeance for what had happened to the homesteads. The theft of women was one offense which was unforgivable.

The present search for Killian the outlaw, was the usual desultory one, with underpaid and overworked lawmen doing what they could, with little or no help from equally busy citizens, but a kidnaping would bring the whole range alive. They would hunt Wade Delhart and forget about Link Killian. And both Wade and the girl knew that they would never find him. He would be dead probably before the sun came up, and his body disposed of so that it would never be found.

Wade stepped back from the box, and tossed the pencil into the fire. "Do your own writing, Killian," he said coldly.

With a curse Killian swung a fist at Wade, but he forgot that Wade's right hand was free. Wade struck first, a short, savage punch with the weight of his brawny shoulders behind it. Link Killian reeled back and fell, and in trying to cushion his fall Killian plunged a hand squarely into the blazing fire. He rolled away with a scream of pain, and came to his feet spitting like a cat. Demoniacal lights danced coldly in his pale eyes.

His companions leaped on Wade, holding him helpless. Killian rushed in with a naked knife, but they pushed him back. "Not yet, Link," one snarled. "We'll make him write that letter first. Then you kin have him, damn his stubborn heart!"

Link Killian nursed his seared hand. "You'll beg me to finish you before I'm through with yuh, Delhart," he frothed.

One of the outlaws picked up a hasp that had been wrenched from an express box, and placed one end in the fire. "Yuh better scratch down what Link tells yuh, Delhart," he gritted. "Jerk off one o' his boots, Tule. We'll tickle his toes with a little hot iron, an' see how tough he thinks he is."

CHAPTER SIX

Death at Dawn!

WADE laughed at them, and the sound of it rang against the lowering rock walls. "You skunks, go ahead an I'll show you how tough a sodbuster can be."

Rose Veach swayed and fought off faintness. "No, Wade," she moaned. "Do what they say. Write it."

He shook his head. "It won't do any good in the long run. This Killian snake means to take out his poison on me anyway. Keep smiling, Rose. Smile at me, and laugh at them. Show these vermin

what it means to go out fighting!"

His hard, unbreakable will seemed somehow to strengthen and uplift her. Rose Veach steadied. She was pale as death, but suddenly she forced a fixed smile to her lips. Something exalted and vastly tender came into her eyes as she stood there looking into Wade's set face.

Her smile remained there as a cursing outlaw drew the glowing wedge of iron from the fire, and pressed it against Wade's foot. The odor of searing flesh arose, but Wade remained unflinching, keeping his gaze fixed on Rose Veach's face.

"You're the woman I love," he told her slowly, and as far as they were concerned the renegades were not even present. "You're wonderful—lovely. No matter what happens tonight, it was more than worth it to me."

"And to me, Wade," she told him. "I've loved you for a long time, I guess, only I refused to let myself admit it. I've watched you ride by me for a year, and I resented the way you looked right through me."

Link Killian cursed frenziedly. "Heat 'er up ag'in," he panted. "Take that damned girl out of here. Give her a dose of the same medicine if she gits gay. Give her . . ." Then Killian's voice trailed away and died.

For an instant, the only sound was the dismal sighing of the stream over its rocky bed twenty yards beyond the mouth of the overhang. Yet in the stillness they all heard it again—the faint sound that had silenced Killian. Now gravel crunched under the measured tread of boots. Slow, steady and ghostly, those footsteps beyond the brush barrier, added a final grisly touch to this scene in the dim gray dawn.

Wade felt a clammy hackling along his spine. The four outlaws crouched and he could hear their breathing stop. Those footsteps came nearer and nearer, then died away.

Killian and his men stood facing the left end of the screen that shielded their firelight—watching for something to appear. The force of their superstitious fancies painted their faces a ghastly hue in the firelight.

And thus it was that a lean figure in the garb of a sodbuster stepped silently behind them around the right end of the screen. It was Johnny Delhart, and he had a six-shooter in either hand.

"Here I am, snakes," he barked, a thin, bitter smile on his lean face.

That spun them around. Johnny began shooting then, coldly and methodically. His first pair of bullets smashed the life from the tallest of the four, pitching him bodily into the fire as the reports were still vibrating against the low rock overhang.

Johnny's guns boomed fire a second time, and a thin outlaw alongside Link Killian went over backward with a strangled sob, his six-shooter exploding wildly.

Killian and the remaining man were shooting now, but their aim was convulsively wild, and they were scuttling away, seeking to escape around the far end of the brush screen.

But from that direction a second man stepped out from the shadows. Barney Veach blocked the path for them.

Link Killian screamed, but the first word was obliterated in the blast of the guns in Barney Veach's hands. Killian fell dead, and before his body hit the ground both Johnny and Barney Veach had massed their fire on the last man. Silence came after the last outlaw went down. The old Crater Mountain Gang was wiped out.

Rose Veach broke the stillness. She staggered to Wade's side and knelt there. Her hands were still tied, but she pressed her face against his. "My dear, my dear," she panted. "Thank God. You're alive!"

Barney Veach and Johnny Delhart stood there watching them for a moment.

Blood ran down from a deep bullet gouge on Johnny's cheekbone. It was to leave a scar that more than one girl would make much over, and listen with adoring eyes while he told about it.

Johnny even smiled approvingly at the way Rose Veach was kissing Wade. The world was full of pretty girls for a handsome young man like Johnny Delhart—girls as pretty as Rose Veach.

NOT until later did Johnny and Veach explain their abrupt presence there. Johnny, repenting his desertion of his brother, had returned to the homestead just as the outlaws were riding away with Wade and Rose as their prisoners. And as Johnny hit the saddle to follow them, he encountered Barney Veach, who came riding up hunting his daughter, whom one of his punchers had sighted heading toward the Delhart homestead before sundown.

The two of them had sight-trailed the outlaws through the starlight, awaiting a chance to jump them without danger to the prisoners. It was Barney Veach who had marched loudly on the gravel out there to draw the attention of the outlaws to a common point, while Johnny crept up and stepped around the brush screen behind them to bring them into his cross-fire.

These things were explained later. Right now they merely watched the happiness of a square-jawed fighting man with a black, seared mark on his bare foot, and a girl who was weeping and laughing at the same time as she kissed him.

"Looks like I'll have to stand for a sodbuster on my range after all," Barney Veach spoke up, trying to act offended. "I always did sorta like Wade Delhart, in spite of his stubborn ways. But by dammit, I won't agree to it unless my son-in-law turns cowman! Since I'm gittin' too old to run the ranch, maybe I kin make a deal with him. Sodbusters on Lodestone Crick, an' an ex-sodbuster as my partner! Thet ought to satisfy everybody, an' it'll give him a chance to prove his idea that farmers kin live side by side in peace. He'll also have a chance to do some fightin' if a real land rush starts. Maybe he won't think sodbusters are so damned agreeable, once he gits on the cowman's side of the fence!"

Wade heard him and looked up. "I'll prove it," he answered. "I'll take that offer."

Rose Veach said nothing. She was only smiling in the mysterious way that women smile when they have their way with men.

THE END

Tinhorn – by Demand

By HARLAN GRAVES

Suddenly the whole world was a hell of flame and gunsmoke. . . .

Euchre Sloan, high-stake gambler, lived only for the unsullied honesty of his game and the friendship of the few men who knew him. Yet to keep his iron-bound code of loyalty he must damn himself with the tragic brand of shaved-deck tinhorn—which death alone could blot!

SLANTING rays of the morning sun through the dust-streaked window, showed a faint tinge of gray in Euchre Sloan's raven hair. Euchre wasn't old—no older than the three other men who sat across the table from him now in the Quaker Bar. But there was in his deep-set eyes the calm resignation of a man who knows life has passed him by, yet who holds no regrets. If he had it all to do over again, Euchre Sloan would be what he was now—a gambler.

"Sorry, Jess." Euchre's voice was a soft murmur as he raked the chips from the center of the table. "I win the pot. The devil takes care of his own."

"Damned if he don't!" Jess Gardner folded his hand and tossed it into the discard. "You've got the devil's luck today, Euchre. If I hadn't known you for twenty years, I'd say it was something more than luck. Deal 'em, and sleep in the street!"

It was almost a ritual, this daily stud game in the far corner of the Quaker Bar. Ten o'clock of any morning would find Jess Gardner and Euchre Sloan waiting at the same table. Then Sam Winslow would drift over from his office, leaving the conduct of Yreka's bank in the hands of his cashier. Nothing short of round-up could hold Lew Johnson at his ranch, out beyond Jess Gardner's vast Flat Top 9 spread.

They played as friends, these four. Nobody won or lost heavily in the final accounting. If there was an edge in the winning, it usually went to Euchre Sloan. If there was a loser, it was Jess Gardner. Euchre Sloan used to wonder sometimes if that wasn't Jess Gardner's way of helping the man who was once his partner. . . .

As he gathered the cards before him, Euchre Sloan could remember when he hadn't needed any help from anybody. That had been a long time ago, when Jess Gardner had been a gambler and not a prosperous rancher. Together they had made the rip-roaring towns—Silver City, the Barbary Coast, the Klondike, then back to Tombstone. Euchre Sloan had tasted glory in those days. He had known wealth and fame.

Then, nearly twenty years ago, they had come to Yreka. Jess Gardner had married and bought the Flat Top 9 brand. He'd tried to get Euchre Sloan to go in with him as a partner.

"We've had our day, Euchre," Jess had argued then. "I'm cashing in while I'm still on the velvet. You'd be smart to do the same."

Euchre had shaken his head. "I'm a gambler, and I guess I'll always be one. I know I won't stay on top of the heap like I am now. I'll go broke, sooner or later. Maybe even, after a few years, nobody will remember the name of Euchre Sloan. But—well, cards are in my blood, Jess. I could no more quit 'em now than that bleary-eyed saddle bum hangin' on the bar could quit whiskey. You savvy that, don't you Jess?"

SHUFFLING now, the cards whispering like the rush of wind under his thumbs, Euchre remembered those words of twenty years before. Maybe he had been a damn fool not to take some of the security that was Jess Gardner's. But he wasn't sorry, even now. He'd made a gamble of his life, and lost. But before he'd lost, he'd known the thrill, the breathless fascination of matching his skill with the best of them.

Once, Jack Hart had followed him to Frisco to play one hand of draw for a cold hundred thousand dollars. Again, Euchre had cut high card and won a sugar plantation in Cuba—then lost it back the next day. There were places where folks still talked about his play. And they always said of Euchre Sloan:

"Win, lose or draw, he plays 'em square. You can bet your losings on that."

Euchre was proud of that reputation. He was proud to know that these men before him now never questioned the speed of his hands. His long, slender fingers were still lightning fast. They were indistinct blurs over the table as he dealt one down, then one up.

"Bet the ace, Jess," his voice rang clear and crisp.

JESS GARDNER pushed chips to the center. The bet was heavy, and Euchre smiled knowingly as he covered it. On rare occasions, when he was behind, Jess Gardner would give him a stiff play that was reminiscent of the old days. And Jess was behind now.

"Better fold 'em, Euchre," he warned. "Your luck can't hold forever."

Euchre smiled blandly. "It's a poor gambler, you know, who can't win his own deal."

The others dropped, and the cards went around again. Euchre Sloan had a pair of eights showing now. His eyes sparkled at this opportunity to taunt his old friend.

"We'll play it sociable," he said with mock seriousness. "I wouldn't want to freeze you out, Jess. The pair bets fifty."

"See, and raise!" Jess Gardner snorted. "I'll shove in the works, Euchre, and we'll see who's the tinhorn. Deal out the hand for a showdown."

The remaining cards were dealt face up. Euchre drew a deuce and a five. Jess Gardner didn't have a pair showing. He flipped over his hole card—another ace.

"If you've got aces beat, take the pot," he said.

Euchre Sloan turned his hole card slowly, a broad smile of triumph on his face. It was another five. Eights and fives. . . . Jess Gardner shoved his chair back disgustedly.

"That's enough for me," he grunted. "I know when I'm licked. It cost me five hundred to find out you can't be beat today. But you just hang on to that money, Euchre. I'll ride you to a tumble tomorrow. Come on, gents. The drinks are on me."

Jess Gardner started toward the bar, Johnson and Winslow behind him. Euchre called after him: "You don't mean you're gonna make the game interesting, do you Jess? If you do, you better bring along plenty dinero."

"Don't worry," Jess flung over his shoulder. "I'll make it interesting enough, even for you."

The smile lingered on Euchre's face as he sorted and stacked the chips. He knew that Jess Gardner was enough of a gambler to regard his losings lightly. He knew too that the game tomorrow would develop into a two-handed battle between them. Like most men who had ever made a living gambling, Jess hated to lose against blind luck. He'd risk ten times five hundred to win his money back tomorrow. . . .

Then Euchre Sloan looked up as someone slipped into the chair beside him. It was young Jim Gardner, Jess's eighteen-year-old son. The kid seemed nervous, and there was a worried look on his face. Euchre smiled at him, went on stacking the chips.

"What's the matter, son?" he asked. "You look like you lost your best girl."

Young Jim threw a sideward glance at the bar where his father was standing. "I'm in a tight," he said bluntly. "I—I wanta talk to you, Euchre. Alone."

Euchre noted the pallor of the boy's face, and his eyebrows raised. "As bad as that?" his face sobered. "We're alone now, kid. What's on your chest? If it's money you need, I can let you have a little."

"It's worse than that," young Jim told him. "I can't talk about it here. Somebody might hear, and then. . . ."

Young Jim stopped suddenly as his father left the bar and started toward them. He swallowed nervously, waited until old Jess came up beside him. Jess looked at him inquiringly.

"What are you doing in town?" he asked gruffly. "I thought I told you to help the boys with the north drift fence." Jess hesitated, looked at Euchre Sloan. "Is he trying to borrow money again, Euchre? You know I told you not to—"

"No, Jess," Euchre interrupted. "He wasn't trying to borrow money."

"Well, I don't want him loafing in town." Jess turned to young Jim again. "You're on the payroll, son, and you'll have to earn your wages, same as the other boys. That means you can't be runnin' into town every time you get the notion."

The boy's face flushed, and he looked at his father defiantly. "Okay!" he snapped. "It's a pity I can't. . . ." He closed his jaws tightly, turned and strode through the door to the street.

JESS GARDNER stood there long after Jim had gone, looking vacantly at the door. Then he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Some of the brittleness left his eyes.

"A little hard on the boy, ain't you?" Euchre Sloan's voice was mildly reproachful.

Jess turned and faced him. "It does seem that way, don't it?" he said tiredly. "That's the hell of it, Euchre. We have to be hard sometimes with those we care most about. Jim thinks I'm stingy because I put him on salary and make him work for it, but that ain't it. I could afford to let him loaf, give him all the money he wanted, but what kind of a man would he be if I did that?"

Euchre shrugged. "But thirty dollars a month, Jess! The kid can't get along on—"

"I got along on a damn sight less than that when I was his age!" Jess argued. "That's the trouble. Kids nowadays don't know what it means to grub for what they get. Jim knows I got plenty, and he knows it will all be his some day. He spends his thirty like it was water, then borrows more from you. Did you ever get any of it back, Euchre?"

"Well. . . ." Euchre smiled wanly. "I don't mind that, Jess. A few dollars here and there—"

"But *I* mind it," Jess broke in heatedly. "I don't want him to think he can get money any time he wants it. I want him to work and sweat, like I did." Old Jess hesitated, looked at Euchre strangely. "It's a big job raising a kid, Euchre, and I don't want to fail at it. I want Jim to be a real man. That means everything to me."

"Don't worry, Jess," Euchre told him. "Jim couldn't be anything else."

But as he said it, Euchre Sloan wondered if that was true. There were certain things about Jim Gardner that even old Jess didn't know. Young Jim had been gambling. Euchre knew that, because he'd given him money to cover his losses. He'd been traveling with the wrong kind of people, too. Euchre had seen him several times lately with Burr Dowd, a man whose past and present income was cause for speculation.

Time after time Euchre had gotten the kid out of scrapes, and said nothing about it to old Jess. Now, as he walked up the street toward the Drovers' Hotel, Euchre wondered about this new trouble that had Jim so worried. Probably another gambling debt that he was being pressed for, maybe this time larger than usual. . . .

Euchre turned in at the hotel, went up the narrow stairs and through the long corridor to his room. He opened the door and saw Jim Gardner sitting on the bed, waiting for him.

"Jim, boy!" Euchre's tone was surprised. "I thought you headed back for—"

"I've gotta see you, Euchre!" Young Jim got to his feet. "I'm in a hell of a mess! I. . . . Shut the door, will you?"

EUCHRE closed the door behind him, waited for Jim Gardner to go on.

"I don't know how to tell you." Jim's voice was suddenly desperate. "I don't know why I was crazy enough to do such a thing. But I—I'm a crook, Euchre! I'm a bank robber! I helped rob the bank over in Wandott last week!"

Euchre Sloan stared at him wordlessly. He hadn't expected anything quite like this.

"It's all Dowd's fault," young Jim went on breathlessly. "He got me to gamble in the Silver Queen till I was way behind. I borrowed from you until I was ashamed to ask for more. Then Dowd told me he

knew how I could make plenty of easy money without depending on the measly thirty dad gives me. I didn't think, Euchre! I helped 'em rob the bank! Now —now. . . ." Jim's voice broke, and he looked at Euchre Sloan helplessly.

"You didn't get caught?" Euchre questioned apprehensively. "Nobody saw you. . . ?"

"It ain't that. But when it came to the split-up, they all just laughed at me. Dowd asked me how I'd like to have it known that I was a bank robber. He said maybe dad would pay five thousand dollars to keep from having it known. Or if I didn't want dad to know it, maybe I'd better get the money myself."

"They can't do that." Euchre tried to sound convincing. "They'd be putting ropes around their own necks if they told anybody."

"They know they won't have to do it," Jim came back. "They know dad would pay what they asked rather than take a chance. That leaves *me* in a spot, Euchre. It would break dad's heart if. . . ."

Young Jim stopped, and Euchre wagged his head slowly. He knew that Jim was right about that. It would break Jess Gardner's heart if he knew that Jim, his son, was a bank robber. Just a little while ago Jess had talked about his hopes for Jim. . . .

"I've just *gotta* get the money someplace," Jim's voice came to him again. "I've gotta get it before midnight tomorrow. What can I do, Euchre?"

Euchre shook his head again. "I could borrow it from your father," he suggested. "All I'd have to do is ask him—"

"No," Jim said quickly. "You can't do that. Dad saw me talking to you at the table and he'd get suspicious. He'd wonder why you wanted that much money. He'd connect it with me right away."

Then Jim Gardner looked at Euchre Sloan strangely. He seemed to want to say something without knowing how to say it. He pulled nervously at a button on his shirt, then:

"I heard what dad said about making the game interesting tomorrow," he said slowly. "I was waiting outside till I could see you. Couldn't—couldn't you get the money that way, Euchre? You gamblers know how to—to win—when you have to."

Euchre looked at him dazedly. He wondered if maybe he hadn't misinterpreted Jim's meaning. "You mean," he said unbelievingly, "You mean you want me to. . . ?"

"Sure, why not? It wouldn't be crooked, Euchre. Dad would just be paying Dowd without knowing it. It's partly his fault anyway, Euchre. It wouldn't have happened if he'd given me the money for some of the things I wanted. Can't you do that, Euchre, for me? You know what it would do to dad if he. . . ."

Then Jim Gardner stopped as he saw the funny look in Euchre Sloan's eyes. For just a moment, Euchre looked as if he was about to smash his fist into Jim Gardner's face. Then, gradually, the unnatural hard brightness left his eyes and he smiled a little queerly.

"I guess you don't know what you're asking, kid," he said hollowly. "I guess you don't know that I never dealt a crooked card in my life, not even against men who were crooked themselves. You didn't mean you thought I would cheat your father, my best friend? You—you didn't mean that, did you?"

Young Jim's eyes sought the floor at his feet. "No, I guess I didn't mean that, Euchre," he said. "I didn't stop to think what it would mean to you. I guess maybe I was just thinking of myself. Forget I said it, will you?"

Euchre's smile softened a little. He suddenly felt sorry as hell as for young Jim Gardner. Jim seemed sort of helpless now, sort of lost.

"Don't worry, kid," Euchre found him-

self saying. "I'll get that five thousand for you."

"How?"

"Never mind how. I'll get it. I've got other friends here besides your dad."

"Can you borrow that much?"

"Sure," Euchre told him. "That'll be easy."

BUT Euchre Sloan knew it wouldn't be easy. It would be damn hard. He did have friends in Yreka, plenty of them, but all of them together couldn't pool five thousand dollars if their lives depended on it. Nobody had that much money, except Jess Gardner—or possibly Banker Sam Winslow.

That afternoon Euchre dropped in at the bank. He sat down in the big chair across from Winslow's desk and tried to act like there was nothing on his mind. He didn't do a very good job of it.

"What's biting you, Euchre?" Winslow regarded him quizzically. "Want to deposit that five hundred you won this morning?"

"Well, not exactly," Euchre told him. "I was just wondering, Sam. What kind of security does a man have to have to borrow a little money?"

"Borrow a little?" Winslow looked surprised, then he smiled tolerantly. "Well, in your case, Euchre, you wouldn't need much security. How much do you want?"

Euchre couldn't help swallowing nervously. "I want five thousand dollars, Sam," he said.

Winslow puckered his lips and gave forth a toneless whistle. He studied Euchre intently. "Well, that's different, Euchre," he finally said. "I couldn't lend you that much without property or chattel to take a mortgage on. I thought you just wanted a hundred or two. I'd have given you that much out of my own pocket, without any security. But five thousand dollars. . . !"

"Yeah," Euchre said slowly. "That is a lot of money, ain't it? I didn't think you could. . . ." Then Euchre got to his feet tiredly, as though there was nothing more to be said. At the door, he turned to Winslow again. "One thing more, Sam. Don't mention it to anybody that I tried to borrow money, will you?"

"Of course not. I always keep the bank's business in strictest confidence."

Out on the street again, Euchre stood in front of the bank and wondered what he could do next. A little smile touched the corners of his mouth as he thought of what was happening. Euchre Sloan, worrying himself sick because he couldn't get his hands on five thousand dollars! That was funny, in a way. It was funny, and it was pathetic. In the old days he would have cut high card, or tossed a coin, for twice that amount—and not batted an eyelash if he had lost. But now. . . .

He walked back to the hotel and went to his room. He sat down on the bed and looked at the blank wall before him. He looked at the wall, but he saw the scared, ashen face of young Jim Gardner, the eyes sunken and lifeless, the cheeks tinted with the yellowish hue that comes with long years in prison. He saw another face too. He saw Jess Gardner's face, with a deep, gnawing hurt in his eyes. And he heard Jess Gardner's voice:

"I want Jim to be a real man, Euchre. That means everything to me."

Euchre didn't know how long he sat there on the bed, seeing those pictures of things that might be. He just realized suddenly that the sun had gone down, that the room was dark. He rose and struck a match, touched its flaming tip to the wick of a lamp. Then he crossed over to a bureau and took out a new pack of cards.

Euchre sat down at the table like a man condemned. He placed the unopened pack of cards before him, looked at it as though it were some sacred, forbidden thing. He

picked it up, set it down again. Then he took his pen knife from his pocket and started working its razor-like edge under the gummed seal. He worked swiftly, deftly, carefully. . . .

THE morning sun thrust its rays down Yreka's long single street, outlining the store-fronts in black, angular shadow. Euchre Sloan stepped down from the hotel porch and started up toward the Quaker Bar. He walked slowly, almost tiredly. His eyes were dull and lifeless, as though he hadn't slept very well last night.

As he walked, Euchre was conscious of the new pack of cards in his vest pocket, pressing against him. He'd spent long hours over that deck last night, shaving the edges with a razor. It was one of the tricks he had learned in the old days, a system of marking that required a sharp eye to detect. Euchre had learned all the clever devices of crooked gamblers as a matter of protection for himself. He'd never dreamed that he'd ever stoop so low as to use them himself.

He came to the Quaker Bar, pushed through the slatted swing doors and moved mechanically toward the corner table. The others were already there, waiting for him.

"You're late," Jess Gardner greeted him. "I've already got the chips counted out, so I'll bank today Is five hundred enough for you, Euchre?"

Euchre nodded and took his usual seat opposite Jess Gardner wordlessly. Nobody said anything as he took the new pack from his pocket. It was their custom to start with a fresh deck. Euchre cut the seal with his thumbnail, removed the cards and spread them out in a great fan before him.

"High card deals," he said.

Lew Johnson dealt first. The play was conservative for the first few hands, but Euchre knew it wouldn't stay that way.

The deal passed from hand to hand, and Euchre Sloan won steadily. He won without taking advantage of the marked deck, and for a little while hope rose in Euchre's heart. Maybe he wouldn't have to do this thing that tore him inside every time he thought of it. Maybe he wouldn't have to cheat. . . .

But as the time passed, Euchre knew he would have to cheat. He was winning, but not fast enough. Johnson and Winslow had dropped out. Other men had drifted into the bar and were standing around the table, watching the play. Jess Gardner was having a sudden streak of luck, betting stiffly.

"I've got you on the run now!" Jess chuckled gleefully. "I knew your luck would break, Euchre."

IT WAS Euchre's deal. He riffled the cards with a breath-taking speed. So Jess thought his luck was breaking? He couldn't let it break!

As he picked up the deck after the cut, Euchre let his thumb slip along the edge of the pack. The top card—Jess's hole card—was a ten!

He dealt one down, one up. He peered at his hole card. He had kings, back to back! Jess had a Queen with his ten!

"Fifty," Euchre said tonelessly.

"Call."

Euchre dealt again—another Queen to Jess, a trey to himself.

"That's more like it!" Jess laughed. "It'll cost you a hundred to see the next one, Euchre."

"Two hundred more!" said Euchre.

Jess studied him intently, finally called, and the cards went around again. Euchre felt suddenly sick inside as the cards fell face up. A ten and a nine! Jess had two pairs now!

"Well," Jess said slowly. "If your hand was worth three hundred before, it ought to be worth that now. That's the bet, Euchre."

Euchre watched Jess shove the chips into the pot. Once more, slowly, his thumb slipped along the edge of the deck. He felt his heart beat faster as he realized that the next card to be dealt was a king! He could get that card himself, win with three kings! Unless Jess called for a cut . . . . But Jess wouldn't call for a cut. Jess trusted him. . . .

Slowly, his hands trembling a little, Euchre started to count out the chips. When he called there would be twelve hundred dollars in the pot. If he raised, Jess would have to stay. He had Euchre beat on the board.

"I'll see you," Euchre tried to keep the shake from his voice, "—and raise a thousand!"

Euchre felt the eyes of the men around the table upon him. "A thousand!" Jess Gardner gasped. "Why, I've got you beat in. . . . You couldn't possibly have more than two kings! Are you trying to buy a pot, Euchre?"

"A thousand," Euchre repeated.

A strange, hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach, Euchre watched Jess cover the bet. He could feel the tension in the air, the expectancy in the eyes of those who watched. He could feel the tremor in his hands as his left thumb slipped the top card back the barest fraction of an inch. His right hand moved quickly, but somehow it seemed to drag, lacking the lightning, eye-defying speed of the old days. He dealt the second card to Jess Gardner, the king to himself!

"Why, you. . . !" Jess Gardner's chair toppled over backwards as he leaped to his feet. The sound was like an explosion in the quiet room. Anger flushed Jess's face. Then anger gave way to reproach, and he looked at Euchre Sloan strangely. He looked shocked, puzzled, hurt.

But Euchre didn't see the strange look on Jess Gardner's face. He couldn't look up at Jess as Jess carefully gathered up only the amount of his own bet. He just sat there, slumped in his chair, waited for Jess Gardner to heap ridicule upon him, to call him the cheat that he was before all these men.

Euchre waited, but Jess didn't speak. He turned without a word, strode across the room and through the door to the street. Euchre sat there for what seemed an eternity, conscious of the questioning eyes upon him. Then he got to his feet tiredly, moved slowly through the door and up the street. . . .

"Well I'll be damned!" somebody said after Euchre had gone. "Do you suppose Euchre tried to pull a fast one?"

"I wonder," said Lew Johnson. "He said something yesterday about it took a poor gambler to lose his own deal. It looks kinda fishy."

"Yeah," said Sam Winslow, remembering Euchre's visit to the bank. "It does look a little fishy at that."

EUCHRE SLOAN felt ten years older as he walked away from the Quaker Bar. His whole world seemed to have suddenly crumbled into dust about him. By one move of his hand he had lost the one thing that he valued most, the one thing that meant more to him than life itself. The name of Euchre Sloan would be cheap and contemptible now. He'd cheated at cards. And Jess Gardner had seen him cheat. . . .

Euchre cursed himself for a fool as he moved tiredly up toward the hotel. He might have known that Jess would catch the unnatural flick of the wrist that was unavoidable in dealing a second. Jess, too, had been trained in the ways of the crooked card sharp. And Euchre had been clumsy. His hand had faltered just as it reached the deck.

Euchre turned in at the hotel, climbed the stairs to his room. He opened the door and looked at Jim Gardner, standing near the foot of the bed. Jim's face was drawn, anxious.

"Did you get it?" Jim asked eagerly. "Did you get the money, Euchre?"

Euchre stood there by the door and looked at Jim Gardner a long time without saying anything. Somehow, he couldn't tell him that he had failed, that he didn't have the money.

Euchre crossed over to a chair and sat down. He took his handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead slowly.

"Now look here, kid," he said finally. "I've been thinking this over, and I'm not going to give you the money. You tell me where you're supposed to meet these gents, and I'll deliver it myself. I wanta make sure they won't bleed you—ask for more after they get this."

Jim's face became thoughtful. "I never thought of that," he said. "Sure! They could keep on bleeding me, couldn't they?" He hesitated, then went on again. "I'm supposed to bring the money to the old line shack up in the Pittman Hills. There'll be three of 'em waiting after dark—Dowd, Willis, Slim Madden."

"Three of 'em, huh?" Euchre's eyes assumed a far-off look. "Okay, kid. I'll take care of everything. Don't worry about it."

There was a note of finality in Euchre Sloan's voice. Jim Gardner seemed to sense it, and he started for the door. Then he turned, faced Euchre again.

"I—I don't know how to thank you," he began lamely. "I'll never forget it, Euchre, never. If there's ever—ever anything I can do for you. . . ."

Jim stopped and blinked embarrassedly. Euchre smiled at him. "Forget it, kid. I'm glad to help you if I can." Then Euchre swallowed and his face became serious. "There—there is one thing you can do for me, kid, if you want to. I'm going away on a little trip, right after I take care of this for you. It came up sort of sudden and—well, I'm afraid I won't have time to see your dad before I go. Will you tell him for me. . . ." Euchre paused, swallowed again. "Well, just tell him that I said 'so-long,' will you?"

Jim didn't answer right away. He was looking at Euchre Sloan queerly now. Twice he started to say something, but each time he closed his mouth again without saying it. Then: "Why, sure, Euchre," he said slowly. "I'll tell dad that."

Then Jim was gone, and Euchre sat there in the big room alone and unmoving, looking at nothing but seeing a million things. After a while he got to his feet and walked over to a trunk in one corner of the room. He lifted the lid, reached down and brought out a gun-belt and a pair of gleaming .45's. . . .

IT SEEMED an eternity before sundown. Euchre watched the gold of it filter through the low-hanging clouds in the west. He waited till the crimson drained from the sky, leaving it gray and lifeless. Then he got his bronc, rode slowly out of Yreka toward the Pittman Hills.

As he rode along, Euchre felt the weight of the two guns at his sides, slapping against his legs with each jolt of his mount. He reflected that this was a crazy thing he was going to do. What chance did he have against three gunslicks, three killers like Dowd, Willis and Madden? But he'd tried everything else and failed. This was the only thing there was left for him to do. Maybe he'd fail at this, too. . .

Then Euchre told himself that he wouldn't fail. He couldn't fail. Too much depended on it. Maybe he'd die, but somehow that didn't seem to matter. Yesterday, when his name was still something he could be proud of, it would have mattered, but today it didn't. . . .

Darkness settled about him as he rode. Euchre knew that the trail had narrowed, that he was climbing up into the hills. He could see the great dark blotches that were trees outlined vaguely against the heavens. Then, ahead of him, he saw the glow of a campfire.

He rode on and came to a clearing. He stopped his bronc and looked at the three men squatted about the campfire. One of them, the one Euchre knew to be Dowd, stood up.

"Who are you?" Dowd asked curtly. "Looking for somebody, maybe?"

Euchre stepped down from his bronc, stood there before them. He saw the hands of the two still hunkered at the fire move covertly toward their holsters.

"Jim Gardner sent me," Euchre said.

"Oh," said Dowd. "Why didn't you say so? The kid got cold feet and sent you, huh? Well, it doesn't matter. Have you got the money with you?"

"No," Euchre said slowly. "I haven't got the money. But I've got something else though that's just as good for a pay-off. Something you can carry to hell with you under your hides!"

As he spoke, Euchre brushed back the skirts of his coat. His fingers curled about the butts of the two glistening guns suddenly brought into view. But before he could draw them, before he could press back the hammers, he heard a deafening roar and felt a searing pain in his side.

Then the whole world was a bedlam of sound, a hell of flame and pungent smoke as Euchre thumbed shots toward the fire. He saw one of the men sink slowly down again as he tried to rise to his feet. Two against one now. Those weren't bad odds for a gambler.

The strange thought came to him that everything important in his life had been a gamble. He'd gambled with the future when he'd decided not to take Jess's offer of a partnership. He'd gambled his name, risked disgrace, when he'd dealt that his first crooked card yesterday. Now he was gambling his life against two to one odds. Gambling—and losing. . . .

Euchre staggered and almost fell as a slug smashed into his shoulder. When he braced himself, he couldn't raise his left arm. He knew he had been hit again and again and that it would soon be over . . . .

Then Euchre heard the pound of hoofs behind him and the crash of guns. He thought he heard them, but he wasn't quite sure, for one minute it was loud in his ears, then the next, it was completely gone. And the pair of dim figures before him were gone, too.

A great sigh shook him and he sank to the ground. He tried to move, to claw himself erect, but he was too weak. He felt an arm under his head and heard Jess Gardner's voice close to him.

"Euchre, look at me!" the voice pleaded. "It's me, Euchre! It's Jess! Don't. . . ."

Euchre fought off the weakness that threatened to seize him. His eyes fluttered open, and he looked up into Jess Gardner's face. He wondered if his vision was blurred, or if those were tears he saw in Jess's eyes.

"You can't die, Euchre! You've gotta live!" Jess went on frantically, a strange catch in his voice. "Jim told me everything, Euchre! I know why you—what you tried to do today. It was big, Euchre, bigger than anything I ever did in my life! I'd—I'd be proud to finish that game, Euchre, just so folks won't think. . . ."

Jess didn't finish, but Euchre knew what he wanted to say. Jess wanted folks to think they had been wrong about the reason why he had walked out on that game in the Quaker. They'd think everything was all right, and Euchre would be able to hold up his head again. He'd be able to play stud again, with Johnson and Winslow, with Jess Gardner. . . .

Euchre smiled softly now. Maybe he would live at that. Maybe that would be worth living for. . . .

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THE BROKEN ARROW

Cole Travers didn't even want thanks for risking his life to save the last of the Broken Arrow herd. But no cowboy like Cole, who had given ten hard years of sweat and loyalty to his boss, would expect to be rewarded with a strangling hempen necktie!

CHAPTER ONE

A Cowman Turns Traitor!

THE evening twilight was ebbing when Cole Travers led his grim and weary crew over the last long ridge and down toward the twinkling lights of the Broken Arrow home ranch. From a hell of crashing guns and dying men they'd made it safely home. Yet Cole found that those Broken Arrow lights seemed to repell him rather than send a glow of welcome through the darkness.

MAN-BREAKER

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

"Get out," Mangum said coldly, "while you're able to ride!"

Novelette of one fighting cowboy's loyalty

Tonight, for the first time in his ten years service, Cole Travers had disobeyed orders. Tonight, he had put aside his unshakable loyalty to his boss. And, in doing so, he had taken what he believed was a definite step toward putting old Magpie Martin's skidding Broken Arrow outfit back on its feet. Yet now a feeling of impending trouble sent a chill, silent warning through him.

Tight-lipped, Cole led his battered crew through the Broken Arrow gate. He loved that old arch; to him it was a symbol of refuge. Inside it he had found peace and trust and all those things men cling to as good and fine. Leaving or arriving now, Cole never failed to regard it with affection. Now he wondered if those punchers behind him—Tomahawk Tucker, Pete Halloran, Blacky Hayes, Slim

Riddle and Sleepy Poke—felt the same tie and the same fierce pride in what they called their outfit. Why else would they stick year after year to a job that broke them and crippled them, that even demanded their lives in payment?

The great log house loomed up beyond the lane, lights blazing from every window, but in spite of that cheery aspect, the place seemed brooding with a dread expectancy. And as Cole loped toward the corral, a slender figure broke from the shadows of the porch.

Shirley Martin's low voice caught in her throat. "Cole! That shooting we heard. . .? What happened?"

Cole swung down, catching the running girl in his arms. She looked into his eyes, and the moonlight, striking across her face, made her a vision of utter loveliness. But she was cold, trembling, and torn with worry. Cole held her tighter.

"Don't worry, honey. What happened tonight happens sooner or later to every coyote that comes to the hen coop once too often. I reckon it'll be sometime before the Broken Arrow writes more beef off to rustler loss. We—"

From the porch, a petulant voice snapped: "What's that, Cole? What's that you said?"

The young Broken Arrow ramrod swung to face the wasted figure of the man who had taken Cole in, a drifting waif, trained him and elevated him to authority on the ranch. Suddenly Cole felt a surge of pity for this aged cowman whose once-powerful figure was now bent with bitter struggle, with old wounds and fractures about which he'd never once complained.

Cole put the girl behind him, his face growing bleak. He said stiffly: "I was telling Shirley how we caught some wide-loopin' sons running off fifty head of our stock. We trailed 'em to Buzzard Pass an'—"

A great breath of relief came from the cowman's set lips. ". . . . an' lost 'em," he finished. "I know. They beat you through the Pass; you fogged 'em some an' turned back—obeyin' my orders."

Cole scowled down at his boss, his big hands crushing his hat. "No, Magpie," said he. "Not that, at all. They beat us to the Pass, but we went through after 'em. Your beef is back on Broken Arrow grass. Four rustlers won't ever devil us no more an' those who got away know the fear of God!"

Then an amazing thing happened. The old cowdog seemed to go berserk. Forgetting the presence of his daughter, he loosed a volley of oaths and leaped at Cole Travers, his skinny fists beating at that broad chest.

"Damn you, Cole, this is the first time you've wilfully disobeyed me. An' you've shore raised hell! How do you know who you've killed? How do you know they wasn't drivin' cattle I've sold? Who were they?"

A little savagely, Cole caught the oldster's flailing hands, shoving him roughly back. His own mounting anger made his voice rough.

"We didn't exchange callin' cards before throwin' lead, Magpie!" he rapped. "They were bold and snuffy and plenty mean. It's not like you to shy at a dead rustler, boss. Where's your guts gone?"

For a moment it seemed as if Magpie would explode. Cole braced himself for violence, but the pressure of Shirley's fingers steadied him, and the two younger people narrowly regarded the old man, at a loss to understand his strange hysteria. Then, as if he found the matter hopeless, his shoulders slumped, the fire went out of him and he turned away.

"Get your supper, Cole, then come for your time," Magpie called back. "I won't have a man here I can't trust!"

"Dad!" Shirley took a quick step after her father, but Cole caught her, shaking his head.

"Don't bother, girl," he choked, morosely. "It's his outfit and his say. If he don't want me. . . ." He shrugged.

"Cole!" Shirley's words came in a headlong rush. "We can't let him send you away! You mustn't leave him; he's so alone. And—oh, Cole, I'm terribly frightened!"

"What can I do?" demanded Cole. "There's something wrong here. If I only knew what it was. . . ."

"I don't know!" sobbed the girl. "Nobody knows but dad." Then she was running toward the house, leaving Cole prey to a flood of darkling thoughts.

COLE spent half an hour administering to the superficial wounds borne by his crew. They asked no questions, but Cole was glad to escape their puzzled, pitying glances. Inside the big house, he found Magpie alone, hunched in a chair before a feeble hearth fire. And now his soft, almost humble mood was more puzzling to Cole than anything that had gone before.

"Sit, Cole!" he said, and settled on the edge of a rawhide-seated chair, he continued: "You've been with me a long time, son. You come here a ragged button, winnin' a place that would have belonged to my boy if I'd had one. I've never put it in words, but I reckon you understood how bad I wanted this outfit to be yours an' Shirley's. . . ." He paused, but when Cole said nothing, blurted out: "You—you like her, don't yuh, son?"

"I love her," corrected Cole, "more than anything in the world!"

Magpie swung back to the fire, a ghostly smile playing over his haggard face. "Good! That's good. Son, I want you to take Shirley to Elk River tomorrow an' marry her. Here. . . !"

He pressed a folded paper into Cole's hands. And the youngster's surprise was complete when he found it to be a check for five thousand dollars!

"Cash that at the Elk River bank," Magpie hurried on. "Then take Shirley outa this Gawd-forsaken country. Take her away from these hard winters an' dry-up-an'-blow-away summers. I talked hard to you out yonder, but that was for Shirley's ears. I don't blame you for what you done. But I want you kids outa here—on yore own, which is right and proper for a man an' a gal. . . ."

"What about you?" Cole demanded.

The oldster winced. "I've got the Broken Arrow and all that goes with it. I stay here."

Cole waited. Here was all he had dreamed of: Security, peace and love. Yet he knew the girl would never agree to leave this troubled old man.

"No, Magpie," he said finally. "Lord knows I want Shirley, but not this way. You're in trouble. And until you're free of it, we'll stay by you. If you was to tell me what devils you, I'd be in better shape to help. Until then I'll hang an' rattle, unless you insist on firin' me. . . ."

"You stubborn young fool!" raged Magpie. "You *got* to go like I told you. An' you will, or you'll ride outa here alone with a month's pay in your jeans!"

"You're the doctor, Magpie," Cole murmured. "But you know Shirley won't go an' neither will I, till my account is squared."

"You're a fool!" spat the cowman. "You can't help me here. Shirley will go if you talk right. You're both in my way. . . ."

Cole stood up, tossed the check into the oldster's lap. He said: "Talk's cheap, Magpie," and would have walked out, except that the cowman stood before him.

"You won't do it, eh? All right, yo're done here, Cole Travers! If I never see you again, it's too soon!"

With a curse, he whirled from the room. And he left Cole staring pityingly after him, wrestling with the impotent feeling of a man who wants very much to repay

a vast debt, yet is balked even in the paying.

CHAPTER TWO

A New Gun-Boss for the Broken Arrow

DENIED sleep by the dogging mystery of the day's events, Cole lay in his bunk, listening to the snores of cowboys and striving to unearth some forgotten thought that might throw light on Magpie's troubles. But his thoughts led around in circles, always winding up to the day twelve months ago, when Magpie had returned from Elk River—his wonted good humor gone, his courage sick, his natural fire dead.

Since that day, Magpie Martin had sunk into the despondency of hopeless old age, carrying the Broken Arrow with him. He had grown silent, sullen and boogery. When his cattle losses mounted with alarming suddenness, he took strange means to combat them. He gave up riding entirely. And his orders had effectively tied the hands of his crew—until tonight, when Cole had seen fit to over-ride them.

Often, in this past year, Cole had surprised a look of abject fear in the oldster's eyes. First he had thought it a symptom of ill-health, but he knew now that it went deeper than that. Vainly, Cole reached out for the answer until, worn out by the mental struggle, he fell into a troubled doze.

Cole rose at dawn, still wrestling with the problem. Scowling and on edge, he was busy at the washbench when three strangers rode into the yard—a cold-faced trio, gun-hung and arrogant. The leader spurred up to Cole with a heavy look of scorn. Cole met the glance in kind. And in that mutual, momentary appraisal an instant enmity was born.

In a land of tall men, this stranger was outstanding. He was a giant with wide flat shoulders and torso whipped lean by long riding. His face was perceptibly thin, his mouth a grim and cynical gash topped by a twisted spike mustache. Even the full impact of the sun failed to change the chill of his eyes. He wore one gun and, though his companions were both double heeled, the tall man packed the greater danger.

"Where's Martin? Drag him out here!" he said abruptly.

Deliberately Cole finished drying his face. "Nobody drags the Broken Arrow boss around, mister. An' the gent that tries it is fixin' to get himself killed. What you want with Magpie?"

"That," sneered the tall man, "is my business. Fetch Martin out here, sudden. I'm not waitin' all day for him."

Cole's lips thinned, but whatever he might have added to the argument was stopped by Shirley's anxious query from the ranch house door. "Who is it, Cole?"

Cole, without turning, watched the tall man's avid glance at the girl's lithe body.

"Go call your dad, Shirley," Cole said. "Tell him there's three gents here who want him dragged out."

Cole heard the door slam. Then he turned away to enter the bunkhouse where the cowhands were pulling on their boots. His grimness and the savage way he belted on his gun woke strange excitement in them. They too belted on their six-shooters and followed him outside.

They were ranged along the bunkhouse wall, stiffly ready for trouble, when old Magpie came out of the house. At sight of the tall rider, he halted, his face jerking.

"Grat!" he croaked. "You—you've the nerve to come here?"

"Nerve," laughed the man called Grat, "is what you need worst around here. I just come from the sheriff in Elk River. He thought mebby I could help you." His smile was oily. "You know me, Magpie. Old friends always come first. I never forget 'em—or forgive 'em."

The old cow man tipped his head, his

eyes cloudy. "Come in, Mangum," he said at last. "Have your boys light down. Breakfast will be ready soon."

He turned wearily inside, Grat Mangum following him. The two strange riders off-saddled and turned their ponies into the pen. Cole watched, puzzled and uneasy, fighting a desire to invade the ranch house lest he awaken the sleeping volcano of trouble hovering over the Broken Arrow.

Breakfast was called, a silent, cheerless meal. After which Magpie and Mangum retired to the cowman's office. A tension-freighted hour passed. Then another. At last, when Magpie and Grat Mangum came out, Cole was shocked by the change in Magpie. He seemed crushed, servile and unbelievably aged. It was as if all his troubles had culminated in this visit—loading his shoulders far beyond his frail strength. Without pausing, the two came directly to the bunkhouse where Cole and the Broken Arrow boys waited. Mangum's two henchmen sidled warily over.

Cole watched Magpie, hoping for some glance, some unspoken order to guide him, but there was none. Magpie planted himself before them.

"Boys, this is Grat Mangum, new half owner of the Broken Arrow," he said huskily. "He'll have full charge from here out. What he says is your gospel."

It was startling news. Cole and the rest stood there, voiceless and stunned. And Mangum was quick to take advantage of their confusion.

"First off," he said, unctuously, "you boys are through here. This outfit's gone to seed. It needs new blood, and I'm fixin' that. Magpie will pay you off."

Turning abruptly, he strode back to the house, shouldering inside, as if, in all truth, he owned it. A stranger to all but Magpie Martin a scant hour ago, now he was a partner in the Broken Arrow, coldly dismissing men who for years had given the outfit their best. Those men were still smarting from wounds garnered in a fighting attempt to pull a staggering outfit from the ruck.

Out of the chaos of his mind, Cole knew only self-condemnation. Could this be the result of his disobeying Magpie's orders last night? In leading these loyal hands against the cowman's desires, it seemed he had ridden them right off the Broken Arrow, and into riding the grub-line.

Embarrassed and uncomfortable, Magpie pulled a fistful of gold and silver coins from his pocket. He counted out fifty dollars, tendered it to snarly Tomahawk Tucker, who was old in Magpie's service when Cole had first walked through the gate.

"I'm payin' you right up to the end of the month, Tomahawk," the cowman mumbled.

The old tophand's lips curled beneath his stringy mustache. With a curse, he struck the money from Magpie's hand. "Take it to hell an' bribe the devil with it!" he growled. And he wheeled into the bunkhouse to pack his almost forgotten warbag.

ONE by one the rest followed him. A breed possessed of courage that knows no defeat save death, they were galled to see Magpie, one of their own kind, bow to less. When they were inside, Magpie's eyes swung to Cole, seemingly bracing himself against the younger man's rebuke.

Cole said pityingly: "Easy Magpie. This is your outfit to do as you like with. Too bad you saw fit not to trust me. Mebby I could have helped you—I don't know. But now it's too late. It's plain you're scared to death an' in bad trouble. That's your worry now that I'm fired—yours and Shirley's. If you still want me to, I'll take Shirley away from here...."

"No!" croaked the cattleman, toneless-

ly. "You're too late." He held out money. "Take what you want—and count yourself lucky to ride out!"

Cole's eyes reflected his scorn, and Magpie turned away with a bitter gesture of defeat. He dragged dejectedly to the house, pushing inside without a glance at Shirley who had come to the porch. But hardly had the door shut behind him, when Shirley was hurrying toward Cole.

He was shocked at the deep lines of grief and tragedy marring her face. Something that would never live again had gone out of her in these last few minutes. Her calm pride was shattered, her slim, soft shoulders depressed. She came straight to him, laid her cheek against his chest. Sobs shook her until he held her at arms length.

"Shirley, honey," he pleaded. "What is this? Has your dad gone loco? Who is this Grat Mangum?"

The girl struggled for control. "I don't know, Cole," she murmured, "but the devil himself could bring no more fear to dad. Why, it seems as if he's taken us over, body and soul! What is to become of us?"

Cole could find nothing comforting with which to allay the girl's fears. Bitterly he condemned himself for not having taken her away, as Magpie had begged him to do. Surely, it couldn't be too late, he told himself. Impulsively, he turned her face up to his.

"What about our dreams and our plans, Shirley?" he asked. "Let me take you to Elk River today. We'll be married at the parson's, then ride away together. Away from all this trouble and worry and grief that we don't understand."

Then he knew by her eyes it was indeed too late. Miserably she shook her head. "No, Cole. We can't run from trouble and hope to find happiness. Forget it and forget me. You must leave here at once, because you can do nothing!"

Cole's voice was desperate as he pleaded. "What can you do, darling, that I can't?"

Her smile was tragic. "Repay my father," she said, simply, "for the comfort and love he gave me during happier days, Cole. Now go. . . . And good-bye!"

She left him staring after her. Nor was he conscious, in his misery, that his old Broken Arrow crew were clustered about him, until Tomahawk spoke.

"Rig your pony with us, Cole! The smell of skunk oil hurts our nostrils, but we'll do like you do—right down to the last bullet."

Cole wagged his head. "You boys go on," he told them. "I'm stickin'!"

"Yo're fired too!" cried the tophand. "Next time that big wolf will write you a ticket with lead of a gun—not a pencil!"

Cole eyed them, one by one. Rollicking Pete Halloran, to whom life was a joke. Taciturn Blacky Hayes of the deft rope hands; gangling Slim Riddle, who still honed for the bronc that couldn't be rode. Sleepy Poke, with the lazy smile that so completely belied the deadly speed that slept in his gun hand. And Old Tomahawk Tucker, snarly and complaining, yet perhaps the best all-around cowpuncher in Montana. Nor was there any more true or trustworthy character and friend.

"Mebby I'm a fool, Tomahawk," Cole said, "but I figger it takes two men to break a friendship. I'll stick, just in case the Old Man repents."

As if he read a rebuke in Cole's words, the tophand's mouth hardened. "The way he acted, he didn't leave us even a coyote hole to crawl into, Cole," he protested.

"'Course not," agreed Cole. "Good-bye, an' good huntin' to you all!"

For a moment they milled, gripped with indecision. Then Tomahawk was first to break. His hand came out. "So long, kid!" The rest shook hands. "So long!" They got their horses and, led by Tomahawk, spurred away, straight-backed and grim until the dust hid them.

Cole felt sick. Old friends were riding ridiere

out of his life. Good friends, to be scattered to the winds, nursing hurts that would leave burning scars upon their hearts, knowing that their trust had been in vain.

Disconsolately, Cole turned back into the bunkhouse. Now he was alone, with a mystery that held grim tragedy and death.

CHAPTER THREE

The Devil's Saddlemates

THE dust settled. Cole seated himself, his back against the bunkhouse wall, his eyes fixed broodingly upon the ranch house. What could he do? What fool urge bade him stay here? He remembered Shirley's words: "To repay my father for the comfort and love he gave me during happier days!" She had said that was her obligation. Well, it was his, too. Magpie had been a father to him. Only an ingrate would forget it now.

Through the taut stillness of the yard, the echo of a slamming door made him jump. Grat Mangum, black and ugly, stood on the porch, eyeing him coldly.

"I told you to get out, Travers," his voice struck across the interval. "And I'm short on patience."

His tone, like a hot gust of wind, fanned the fire of Cole's hatred to full flame. And the man's two gunmen, backing him were added salt in Cole's sores.

He laughed coldly and without mirth. "I like it here, Mangum. My roots are down deep. You know what happens to a tree when you tear it up."

Grat Mangum halted. "Yes!" he said. "It dies!"

And in that moment, Cole saw the real Grat Mangum, as if his suave mask had been lowered, bearing all his cruel brutality. Then Cole saw more. The man's pupils were alive with a burning lust to kill.

"Get out," Mangum said, gesturing with his thumb, "while you're still able to ride!"

Cole came effortlessly to his feet, an icy tide pouring along his veins, then leaving him calm and ready. Here it was—one against three! The best he could hope for was the destruction of Mangum before the others had their way. And now Mangum's gun arm was slowly angling, his fierce smile changing.

"Mangum!" Magpie Martin's voice sheered through the yard. "Lift a gun against that boy and I'll make an end to you!"

Mangum seemed to relax. He cursed softly, backed a dozen feet farther from Cole, then turned to the house, followed by his men. Magpie stood planted on the porch, a double-barreled scattergun in his white-knuckled hands, and Shirley standing beside him. All Mangum's spleen seemed gone as he walked boldly up and took the weapon from the cowman's hands.

"Don't ever do that again, Magpie," he warned. "You've placed the spread in my hands and I'll run it my own way—even to killing the vermin that infest it." He glanced back at Cole. Whereupon he took Magpie's arm and led him inside. The girl followed them.

Cole was thoroughly aroused. He went back to the bench along the bunkhouse wall, and the two gunmen took up their silent watchfulness from the corrals.

The day advanced. The house might have been deserted for all the life that showed there. What strange scenes were being held within those walls And what sinister influence, wondered Cole, did the killer hold over Magpie Martin. As the hours passed, the miasma of disaster seemed to settle thicker over the Broken Arrow, until it lay on Cole's nerves like the grating of a file. Then, after awhile, voices rose and fell inside the house, the words unintelligible to Cole. Once Mag-

pie's voice rose, shrill and desperate: "Damn you Mangum, ain't there no satisfying you?" And the two men at the corral laughed harshly.

The afternoon was waning when Mangum stalked outside. He called his men, issued curt orders that sent them riding away, one toward Elk River, the other straight into the rough breaks of the Wind River Range, to the west. After which he stared solemnly at the unmovable Cole Travers, laughed silently, and went inside again.

Twilight touched the land and lamplight gleamed in the ranch house windows when six lean, gun-hung riders on magnificent horses came in from the uplands. Grat Mangum came out to meet them. Their talk was flat and hard, their low laughs brassy and mirthless. Only when the lamp silhouetted Shirley's form at the window did humor touch them. And the ugliness of that humor was like a knife in Cole's ribs.

THE riders pulled their kaks and stalked into the bunkhouse with their bedrolls, eyeing Cole with grim contempt. And Cole gave it back, recklessly. The odds were long now, and Mangum was safer. Cole wondered if Magpie's well-meant interruption had robbed him of his last chance at the interloper.

Wong, the Chinese cook, rang the supper gong. Like starved wolves, the new crew hurried to the cookshack and Cole took the chance to angle sharply toward the house. Shirley had not shown herself since morning. He must see her now; he might not have another chance. He entered the living room without knocking.

Shirley was alone, strangely pale and wan. She looked at Cole from dead eyes. And when he took her hands she was stiff, unyielding, her voice cold.

"What is it now?" she demanded. "Haven't you caused enough trouble here, already? You were discharged and told to ride away. Well, why don't you go? Can't you realize you're not wanted here—by anyone!"

Cole stared at her, stunned. Then his old warm smile lighted his face. "I understand your purpose Shirley, and I appreciate it. But my safety don't count. Yours and Magpie's does. Tell me what you know."

The girl went white. Then a spur chain jingled, heavy footsteps shook the porch and Grat Mangum was in the doorway, smiling. He bowed to the girl.

"Leave the room, Shirley! It's time Travers and I came to an understanding."

The girl's shoulders slumped. "No!" she said softly. "It musn't be that way. Cole just came to tell me good-bye, Mister Mangum. He's going now, aren't you, Cole!"

"No!" snapped Cole, savagely. "Not till I see what this gent's got to be proud of!"

Mangum laughed as if it were a joke. "Spunky, I'll say that for you. To humor Magpie, Travers, I've agreed to keep you here. You'll be a regular hand, an' as such you'll keep your place. No thirty-a-month cow nurse will be sparkin' Shirley Martin. If you don't like it that way, ride out! You'd quit anyway if you was smart. You made a lot of trouble for this outfit yesterday—trouble you'll have to clean up. There'll be plenty out yonder sweatin' blood to get you over their sights. Well—what's it to be?"

Pleasantly surprised, Cole said: "I'll stick, Mangum. As for dry-gulchers, I'll chance the risk. If they miss, I'll have a chance to find out who they're working for. Yeah, I'll stick!"

"A hog for punishment," grinned Mangum. "Now get out to the bunkhouse where you belong, an' don't come around the house until I send for you."

Raging inwardly, Cole quit the room, pausing on the porch as choked sobs came from Shirley's room. She was weeping—

as if in mourning that he had decided to stay.

The men were finished with supper and were filing out when Cole stepped into the cookshack. No one spoke to him. They were surly and unsociable, restless and furtive, wary as wolves. So different from the jovial crew the Broken Arrow had known.

Cole ate slowly, relishing the hot food in his empty stomach. In him was the firm conviction that he would be called upon to put his strength, his speed and judgment soon to a bitter test. Mangum had indicated a compromise with Magpie, but Cole was under no illusions regarding the man's sincerity. He would have to be on guard every second of the time.

Finished, he followed the crew outside, moving warily to one side of the lighted doorway as he quit the place. But the instant silhouette he made brought a sharp command from over by the barn.

"Travers! I want you here!" It was Mangum's voice.

It was one of those nights when even the starlight fails to shake the ebon mantle lying along the earth. Cole could not see Mangum, which made him nervous. But he saw no other alternative but to walk toward that flat voice.

Slowly he crossed the yard, treading lightly, struggling to pierce the gloom ahead, his nerves crying out for violent action rather than this cat and mouse game where the odds were building up against him.

Now Mangum's bulk loomed before him, an indistinct blot against the dirty canvas of a chuckwagon. He seemed alone. Cole halted before him, poising lightly.

"What was it, Mangum?"

"Now!" spat the new ramrod, and that was all he said.

Cole's world exploded in a thousand, bombing lights. Pain shot through his skull. He heard his own hoarse cry, dim and remote. A merciless bludgeon was smashing his head, again and again, driving him down. Hard ground rose up to smash his face. Dust was in his nose, his mouth, his throat and blood was in his eyes.

Then he knew no more. . . .

COLE came out of the blackness with the sound of someone groaning in his ears. And it was some time before he realized that the sounds emanated from his own throat. Never had he suspected that such agony was possible. His legs seemed gripped in a vise, while ruthless hands wracked and pounded his upper body. His head seemed swollen to twice its normal size. Sharp pain tore at his chest, timed to the beat of his heart.

A cool breeze commenced to flag his lagging senses to life, making the pain more acute. Some brittle, hairy surface scratched his face and he had the sensation of falling. Commanding his every faculty, he cast off his mental cobwebs. The ground rushed past beneath him. The swift beat of hoofs was in his ears, the acrid tang of dust stung his nostrils. And then he knew. He was bound, belly down, across a saddle. A squad of riders hemmed him. Up ahead rode Grat Mangum, his tapering form outlined against the lights of Elk River.

A flat voice struck through the gloom. "He's comin' alive, Grat!"

"What matter," came Mangum's answer, "whether he rots in jail or six feet of ground?" There was no more talk.

Cole kept silent, hating himself. He had walked right into this, where a little care would have left him free to help Magpie and Shirley. As strength returned, he struggled vainly against his bonds. But that struggle seemed only to increase his torment. He was half crazed with pain when the cavalcade loped into Elk River.

It was late, and the walks were deserted. But oddly enough, a bright light still burned in the sheriff's office. Mangum

swerved to the rack. The men dismounted, cut Cole's feet loose and pulled him from the saddle. His legs wouldn't hold him, so two hard-handed riders took his arms and jerked him erect.

Mangum led the way, shouldering into the jailhouse office. Morose Bill Willis, the sheriff, rose from his desk to stare at them.

"You shore took your time, Grat. Is this the man?" Willis asked.

"In person!" chuckled Mangum. "Cole Travers—boss rustler! Your troubles are over, Bill. The county's gonna vote you back in office for makin' this ketch."

The sheriff stepped close to Cole, tipping up his face. "No wonder ol' Magpie never wanted me ridin' his way. He always allowed he could skin his own skunks. It's plain it was his pride, shieldin' the man he trusted. Poor Magpie! Fetch Travers inside, Grat. We'll lock him up so I can git home to bed."

Cole had always considered the lawman honest, but it was plain now that he was part of this conspiracy. His previous knowledge of their coming, his greeting, his smugly professed pity for Magpie Martin—all these things betrayed him.

Cole recalled the rider who had roared away toward Elk River earlier in the day. Bill Willis had undoubtedly received his instructions then. But why? Cole wondered why Mangum hadn't killed him back yonder, and made an end of it. That would have been so easy.

With the answer so completely escaping him, Cole threw off those restraining hands and made a mad try for the door, but he could not reach it. A stunning blow sent him spinning. Strong hands lifted him, dragged him back. A hard fist ripped his face; a driving boot toe took him in the ribs as he fell, and an iron door clanged hollowly.

Some one said: "He shore acts guilty as hell, don't he?"

Sunlight was streaming through the barred windows of his cell when Cole awoke to the prodding boot toe of the deputy sheriff. Often, on pay-days, Cole had lifted a friendly glass with this man. Now the lawman was sullen and uncommunicative. He set a tray of food and a basin of water on the cot, locked the cell and went away.

Washed and fed, Cole felt better, though his whole body was one vast ache. But worst of all was his worry about Shirley and his utter helplessness. He had taken chips in a game where every card was stacked against him. His friends were gone and scattered. The hatred of Mangum was a dark cloud, promising a flood of disaster. The law was his enemy. Even Magpie must confess that Cole had violated his stern orders. There seemed no way out.

The morning passed; noon came and went. Then, dusty and gaunt from long riding, Sheriff Willis came to Cole's cell. "I've just come from Mangum's Long M, in the Wind Rivers, Travers," he said. "I've seen the evidence and it looks bad."

Cole loosed the reins of his temper. "A crooked sheriff," he flared, "can always find the kind of evidence he wants. And if he can't find it, he makes it!"

"I take that unkindly, Travers," protested the sheriff. "Dead men don't lie!"

Cole started, staring. "Dead men?" he echoed, and he was thinking of Tomahawk and the boys. "What do you mean?"

"Those four boys in Buzzard Pass," intoned the lawman. "The four you admitted to Magpie that you killed. They been identified by Mangum as his boys!"

Cole choked: "Mangum's playing you for a fool, Willis! Those four were rustlers, running off Broken Arrow beef. Sure I killed them! They had it coming."

"That's not the way the survivors of that fight tell it," said the lawman. "They claim *you* were the one who was running off Long M beef. Here's another reason your yarn don't hold water: Mangum

wouldn't rustle his own beef, would he? And he owns half of the Broken Arrow!"

"Not till yesterday, he didn't!" rapped Cole.

"For more than a year," countered Willis. "Old Magpie will testify to it!"

Cole knew then that they would put him away; hang him, maybe. Hopelessly, he sank down on his cot, hardly hearing the sheriff leave. Mangum and his Long M—beyond Buzzard Pass! That, then, explained both the rustling and Magpie's strange order. And it pointed at some sinister club held by Mangum over the hoary head of the Broken Arrow boss.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cole Bucks a Stacked Deck

FOR three days Cole paced his cell like a restless lion, torn with the struggle to get at the heart of the mystery. Then the sheriff led him, handcuffed to the courthouse. A coroner's jury, composed of loafers and saloon hangers-on, listened to the sheriff and Grat Mangum. They listened to Cole's story, too, and laughed at it.

Their verdict was a mere formality. They indicted Cole for murder. And with him, Tomahawk and the old Broken Arrow crew. Even before the sheriff took Cole back to jail, the prosecutor instructed the lawman to run down the missing suspects and jail them, too.

Back in his cell, Cole prayed that Tomahawk and the boys were well out of the court's jurisdiction.

That night, Cole lay on his cot, tortured by fear for Shirley—cooped up in the same house with the devil, Mangum. In the outer office, Bill Willis' asthmatic breathing sounded above the rustle of his Cheyenne paper. From beyond came the muted sounds of night life in saloon and gaming hall.

Breaking into all this, the outer jail-house door creaked open and the echo of a boot step struck through to Cole. A gruff voice said: "Howdy, Sheriff. Lookin' for me?"

The lawman's chair came down hard and his voice lifted, high-pitched and uncertain. "You? Well I'm damned!"

"Here's my gun, Willis!" said the voice.

And after awhile, during which Cole's heartbeat lifted, the sheriff said: "Cripes, Tomahawk. You wouldn't shoot me?"

"Not if you're a nice boy," came the deadly chuckle. "Gimme that shootin' iron! That's the ticket. Turn down that light. Now go in an' turn Cole loose!"

"They'll hang you for this, Tomahawk!"

"A man can hang only once, Willis! Move!"

The door opened and the two men came into the cell block. Tomahawk spoke Cole's name and the youngster swore. "Good Lord, Tomahawk! I'd hoped you were well out of this mess. They've indicted all of us for murder."

Tomahawk's chuckle was sardonic. "Indicted me, eh? Well, there's a heap uh slack rope between indictin' an' hangin'. Git that door open, Bill. Fine. Now, Cole, belt Willis' gun on yourself while I lock him in. Nothin' like a sheriff tryin' out his own jail."

"You're just buildin' up the score against you, Tomahawk," growled Willis.

"An' settlin' my score with certain polecats," answered the old timer. "Don't raise no scent, Bill."

The cell door clanged shut and Tomahawk led the way out. But they were not yet free of the jail when Willis decided to raise a "scent". He lifted his voice in a shrill yell, bawling like a coyote. "Help! Help! They're springin' Travers loose!"

Cole swept the lamp from the office table, plunging the jail into darkness. The town sounds stilled, then gave way to excited turmoil. Boot steps pounded the walks; calls rocketed along the street. And

from across the dusty main drag a bull voice bellowed: "What's goin' on in the jail?"

Tomahawk already outside, said: "It's Travers—raisin' hell!"

A man came running across the street. Tomahawk's gun rose and fell once, and the man slumped to the walk. Cole cleared the threshold and then the two of them were running back to the alley toward waiting saddled horses, with Tomahawk's fervent wish that he had gagged that sheriff with a rap on the head ringing in his ears.

Behind them, men were boiling from saloons and gaming halls. As the sheriff still yelled. Ahead of the two running men loomed a group of waiting horsemen.

Slim Riddle's voice came out of the gloom. "Here's yore bronc, kid. Straddle him an' le's slope!"

Cole's throat was tight as he swung up. Good friends! Might have known they'd stick to him. They thundered over the bridge and out of Elk River. Yelping wolf-like at the futile lead that sought them out. Cole's pony ran easily, boring into the night with old saddlemates crowded his stirrups. The old hopelessness was gone; courage and confidence returned to cheer him.

BEYOND the town, the crew dropped behind Cole. It was their way of letting him know his leadership was still respected. He held a swift pace away from the Broken Arrow, much as he ached to ride there with his answer to Mangum. But these boys had done enough. Their blind faith at Buzzard Pass had brought them only grief. Freeing him but added to their future woes. He had no right or desire to plunge them deeper into the morass of his growing troubles.

Hour after hour they rode. The Big Dipper soared across the sky. When it swung low and when a strange pallor heralded the first promise of the dawn, Cole pulled sharply off the trail, plunging deep into the tangled growth of a bottom land.

"Far enough," he called. "Light down and stretch."

Leather squealed, trappings jingled. Cole scraped together a pile of dry twigs and struck a match. A tiny blaze grew, lighting the faces of weary but grimly satisfied men. Wordlessly, they ringed the fire, permitting themselves the solace of tobacco.

After a long silence, Tomahawk said: "What's next, Kid? How do you read the cards?"

Cole stared at each in his turn. Then he let his glance drop to the fire. The features of these reckless saddlemates were stiff and set, ugly with a long repressed urge to battle. One word would ignite the powder of their ire, send them raging at the Broken Arrow to kill and destroy. Thus forever would they outlaw themselves. So Cole simulated the hopelessness he had left behind him.

"All things come to an end, boys, an' this is the end of us," Cole said. "The Old Man chooses to side a human devil. Between the two of them and the law, there's no sleep for us in this country."

Tomahawk grunted: "What are you thinking, Cole?"

"It's our move," murmured Cole. "From here we split six ways, leaving no tracks in the dust. Yep, we shake hands here an' hunt new holes."

None of them had an argument. After awhile, Tomahawk said: "Where will you ride, kid?"

Cole said: "Where my nose leads me. If you don't know, you won't be troubled. "I'm plumb grateful for what you boys have done, an' I express that gratitude now. But I'm poison to coyotes—marked for a noose. You boys get out. When you're gone, I'll head yonderly."

Silence dragged out. The fire died. Tomahawk snapped his cigarette butt into

the ebbing coals. "All right, boys," he said gruffly. "The boss says our job's done. Dawn's nigh, an' we best ride. See you in hell!"

Hands were silently gripped. The men looked to their cinches and swung up. Each plainly uncomfortable and dissatisfied, but still obedient to the will of their young ramrod. Hands flung up in farewell and they broke away without further word, riding together until they cleared the willows.

Cole heard them stop, heard the unintelligible growl of Tomahawk's voice. Then they were riding, each in a different direction. Hoofbeats died away. And Cole was left with an aching lump in his throat and only the wakening creatures of the wild for company.

TO AVOID armed riders scouring the breaks of the hills, Cole clung to coulees and bottom lands, taking his slow and wary way northwestward. Thus it was mid-afternoon before the rambling buildings of the Broken Arrow hove in sight.

Like a man bound for the gallows from which there could be no reprieve, Cole tipped up out of a watercourse and rode boldly through the gate. And if the very audacity of his move should bring Mangum roaring from the house, it would be all Cole asked—all he could hope for.

But his approach brought no one to the yard. The ranch seemed abandoned save for smoke from Wong's chimney. And that upset his vague plans more than if Mangum had been there, flanked by all his crew. What was wrong?

He quit his saddle, whipped out his gun and bounded up the steps into the house. With icy fingers gripping his heart, Cole entered the empty rooms, his call for Shirley echoing hollowly in the empty space. Then, panic gripping him, he darted outside and raced to the cookshack.

"Wong!" he cried. "Wong! Where's Shirley? Where's Magpie?"

The Chinaman appeared at the open door, his bland face unreadable. "H'lo, Missa Cole," he greeted. "Evlybody lide alongside town. Missy Shirley ketchum husband—new boss. Wong think no good."

"A husband?" Cole stared at him, then suddenly he was breaking for his horse. His brain was a searing flame that drove him like a goad, and the cool wind whipped his fevered face. Over and over again he repeated the same prayer. "God, if only I can get there in time. God. . . ."

The sun was setting when Elk River rose out of the prairie floor before him. Mercilessly, Cole called for the last iota of speed from his reeling mount. The game horse responded, as if sensing its rider's desperate need. But a quarter mile from its goal, it died under Cole, throwing him heavily.

Cole came up, dazed and shaken, hunting frantically for his gun that had catapulted from his holster. He found it and went threshing across the sage flats on foot, lashed to top speed by the measured pealing of the church bell.

To avoid the crowd gathering before the steepled church, Cole pounded down a rear alley, pausing at the rear door to gather his lost breath. In a moment he tried the door. It gave to his hand. He stumbled through a dim room, found another door and stepped into the long seat-filled hall designed for worship. At first glance the place seemed empty save for the dimly discernable figure of the rector tolling at the bell cord in the vestibule. Then the sun's last rays, striking through the high stained windows, laid a bar of colored light across the shaking shoulders of a slender form that knelt before the altar. Cole knew it was Shirley, even before his quick step commanded her startled attention.

She lifted tear-streaked cheeks, her eyes widening. "Cole!" she choked. "You—you shouldn't have. . . ."

Cole closed the gap, lifted her roughly. "Never mind about me," he said impatiently. "What about you and Mangum? Are you. . . ?"

"Not yet, Cole!" whispered the girl. "But you mustn't stay here. Please go. In a minute, Mangum and his men will come! The whole town will be filing in. They'll. . . !"

Cole wagged his head. "Mangum," he said, grimly, "has lost his last chance to marry you, Shirley. Elk River will celebrate his funeral, but not his wedding."

"No!" she cried, clutching at him. "You mustn't do that, Cole—not what you're thinking! If you do, you'll send dad to prison. That's his hold on dad, Cole. Proof that dad was a member of a bunch that rode outside the law is in Bill Willis' office safe, placed there by Mangum. It—it was so long ago, and Dad gave me his word that he was only with them a short while—until he met my mother and fell in love with her. He was just a hungry kid who cleared out the first chance he got. And—Bill Willis was in the same wild outfit. Mangum holds the deadwood over him as well, arranging it so that Willis doesn't dare cross him.

"This way, so long as Mangum lives and has his say, dad will be safe. But if the wedding doesn't go through, Dad will be ruined. Even if you kill Mangum, that's what will happen. Don't you see, Cole? You'll only make it worse. This—this is the only way!"

Cole turned to ice, every emotion in him crying out against such a sacrifice on her part. He owed Magpie a lot—sure. But Magpie had burned down the candle of his life, while Shirley had just lighted hers. Both Shirley's fears and her father's strange actions had clearly pointed to Magpie's shadowed backtrail, to his guilt of some ancient wrong-doing. But Shirley was innocent and Magpie was apparently willing she assume a burden far worse than prison.

Well. . . ! There was nothing about it that engendered a mental struggle in Cole. No matter what happened to him or Magpie, Shirley must be spared this horror. To insure that, Mangum must die. And, with a fatalism of resignation, Cole knew that he must die, too.

"Good-bye, Shirley," he heard himself saying. Then he was blind to her tears, tearing himself from her desperate grip and striding past the staring preacher at the door, moving outside to keep a rendezvous with death. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Into the Gun-Flame!

THE growing crowd before the church took no notice of him. Their eyes were turned down street, where tall, immaculate Grat Mangum stalked arrogantly down the far walk. Behind him straggled his gun crew—a royal bodyguard for the new king of Wind River Range.

Cole felt himself moving, his muscles like woven wire and icy streams pouring along his spine. He was halfway through the crowd before anyone took notice of him.

A gasp went up: "Cole Travers, the rustler!"

But his chill face, his measured, deadly stride kept them quiet. Those before him gave back, leaving but one man between Cole and his quarry—old Magpie Martin, a broken caricature of the one-time boss of the Broken Arrow.

His startled eyes flashed from Mangum and his lips made the query: "Cole . . . ?"

Then Cole was beside him.

"I'm sorry for you, Magpie," he said in passing. "Mangum's through—no matter who it hurts!"

He kept on, a sudden, fierce thrill pouring through him. Magpie was saying: "You make me ashamed, son. An' you

make me proud—again!" He leaped to Cole's side. And thereafter their boots beat as one in the dust of the thoroughfare.

Now a sullen roar beat through the town and the townsmen scattered as Mangum led his men to the axis of the street. There they paused, his men fanned out behind him, his eyes fixed upon the pair who came so slowly, so deliberately, toward him.

The silence of death had fallen upon the town. And through that silence came Mangum's taunt: "Boys, lookit what Magpie's draggin' in with him! Cole Travers, ripe an' ready for pickin' from a gallows tree!"

The echoes flung back from the false-fronted buildings. Those two, marching shoulder to shoulder, uttered no word in answer, varied in no way the deliberate solemn tempo of their stride.

Shadows crossed Mangum's face. His shoulders settled and his arms angled. His men matched his movements, their eyes fixed unwaveringly upon their leader.

Step by step, Cole and Magpie advanced. Seven to two were murderous odds, but so intense was Cole's concentration now that he knew he could not fail. They would kill him—but not before he got Mangum!

Watching them come on, Grat Mangum's face changed. He wavered, took one backward step.

"Stop comin', you two," he rasped, "or stop lead!" Then, when his threat failed, his voice rose shrilly: "Travers is on the shoot! Git him, boys! But don't drill the old man 'less he draws!"

But Magpie was drawing as Cole's hand was streaking to his holster. And the calloused palms of Mangum and his renegades were slapping leather. Cole braced himself as he drew. This was the end; he had to make it sure.

Then the singing tension of Elk River was torn asunder by the ancient, shrill war-cry of the range land. Two men came bounding from between buildings on the north side of the street, three from the south side, tearing in on the flanks of the renegades, with drawn guns. They were Tomahawk Tucker and his boys! The old Broken Arrow crew, challenging the gun sway of the new!

Sight of them shook Cole Travers for one brief second as time seemed to stand still. The crazy, fighting fools! Their effect upon the Mangum men was demoralizing as they whirled from Cole and Magpie to face the new threat. But Mangum's gun was flashing out, his eyes burning into Cole's. Cole didn't hesitate. In one single movement he kicked old Magpie's feet from beneath him, and whipped up his gun.

A blast of bullets shuddered through Elk River. Mangum rocked on his boot heels, his muddy eyes widening in fear of the thing that is death. Then he was down. His men, caught between three fires, were shooting and falling.

Tomahawk went to one knee, howling curses. Sleepy Poke pitch-poled into the dust, dropped his gun and recovered it, then continued the fight, belly down in the street. And with the crashing hell undiminished, the last of Mangum's men already dying, was emptying his pistol into the ground.

FIRING ceased, it was over. Magpie Martin was rising, cursing, sobbing and laughing, all in one breath. His face cracked in a grin, Tomahawk limped toward Cole on a bullet-bitten leg. Pete and Blacky and Slim were moving to join the rest, their guns still bare, their eyes warily on the crowd. Sleepy Poke lay where he had fallen, fighting a new fight against the agony of bullet shock.

His struggles caught Cole's eye. Cole moved to Sleepy's side and lifted him in his strong arms.

"Stay close to me, boys," Cole shouted, "with your eyes skinned back! We don't

know how the town will jump. We're goin' down an' see Bill Willis!"

No one demurred. Together they moved along the walk, turning into the sheriff's office. The silent townsmen made no move against them. They had witnessed a miracle, and the wonder of it was still upon them.

Sheriff Bill Willis rose from his desk to face them, his features working, strange lights touching his eyes.

"Sheriff," Cole said, "just how much are you prepared to gamble, playin' a dead man's cards?"

Willis started. "Then Mangum's dead?"

"Dead as hell, Willis!"

The sheriff braced his fingers on his desk, swaying forward as he looked at them with strangely soft eyes. "When that shootin' started," he murmured, "I had no hope but that it would be Mangum who'd darken this door. All my life I've knowed him, an' feared him, an' done his will. Now, maybe, I'll know my first peace. There'll be no charges for this work. Magpie, take your boys home and build up your Broken Arrow spread. Whatever Mangum said to traduce the character of a man who's gone as far as you have, I choose to forget. Tomorrow will be a clear, untroubled day."

He ceased talking. Into the momentary silence, a feminine voice struck from outside; a voice tremulous with hope reborn.

Cole went to Shirley Martin, only then beginning to realize that there were tomorrows—tomorrows which, from the thing he read in her eyes would be as the sheriff had said—clear and untroubled. . . .

THE END

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By BART CASSIDY

Out leaps young Shortgun Cordes, his eyes narrowed and in his hands a cocked six-shooter.

A FRIEND IN NEED FOR TENSLEEP

The dead-or-alive reward on our old friend, Tensleep Maxon, brought that horse-loving outlaw into a hidden renegade death-trap. His one chance to get out alive lay in the hands of a hard-fighting youngster—who wanted above all to be as ruthless a hunter of wanted men as his own lawman dad!

WITH my Rusty hawss stalled in front of a double ration of oats an' hay, I've got nothin' in the world to do but try to drink the town of Thermopolis dry on a dollar an' six bits. So I'm bellied up to the Hole-in-the-Wall Bar, makin' as good a start as I know how, when I get to wonderin' if there's a familiar face in the town. An' I'm a liar if I don't lift my eyes an' spot one, first crack! I poke over to a round table where a tall, hungry lookin' gent is playin' solitaire.

"Bet you one hard, round simoleon you don't lay out eleven cards, Dismal," I twit him.

Dismal Crane lifts them sunken, bloodshot eyes of his, then his gaunt face clears an' he grins.

"Tensleep Maxon!" he blats, an' grips

my hand in his bony paw. "I ain't see you since Butch an' the boys—"

"—saved yore neck in Landusky," I fill in, speakin' soft. "An' as far as that name's concerned, the more you forget about it the better I'll like it. The name's Jones—Indigent Jones. I'll thank you to use it."

"Indigent?" he puzzles, knittin' his brows. "What a hell of a name! What's it mean—a buck Injun?"

"Not any, Dismal. It means broke, busted, flat, poverty-struck, destitute an' plumb without mazuma. Until I run into somethin' more profitable than legal. An' when I do, I'll be in the money again."

"Set down," he invites me, an' orders a couple whiskeys. When we've gulped 'em, he says: "You reckon you'd be interested in a hawss round-up, where the only investment is loss of a little sleep, a few blisters on yore south end an' where the split will mebbyso top a thousand?"

"Not only interested," I enthuse, "but plumb eager. Tell me more."

"Le's git outa here," he says, an' leads the way into the night.

So him an' me walk down the street an' sprawl out on the bank of the murmurin' Big Hole River. Dismal don't say nothin' for a long time, then after awhile he straightens, rams his fist into his palm an' says: "Damned if it won't work elegant!"

"Such as what?" I ask.

He regards me in the dark. "Some of us boys has banded together fer mutual advantage," he explains. "Doin' odd jobs here an' there an' livin' the life uh Riley. Now the sheriff, up at Big Hole City, owns the fastest runners in this basin. Morgans crossed with Hambletonian. Was he to start chasin' us boys on that stock, we might's well be snubbed to a hitchin' post. That there is what you call a public menace."

"Nothin' else," I nods, sympathetic. An' somethin' orta be done about it."

"Just what I was comin' to," he says. "I was thinkin' that, with what you know about the hawss game, Chang Gargan might be willin' to cut you in with the rest of the boys. That is, pervidin' you was willin' to throw in with us."

In my present financial state, I'm deeply touched. "That's downright noble of you, Dismal," I tell him, grateful. "An' the best augerment I know fer havin' friends. I'll be proud to meet the boys an' give 'em the advantage of my wide experience."

An' that's howcome me to tie up with the notorious Badwater Gang. Though, until my enlightenment, I wouldn't have known them boys or their works from nothin'. It just goes to show the evils a lust for gold will lead a gent into. An' it proves the fallacy of a lone wolf tryin' to run with a pack. A feller lives an' learns.

Along about ten o'clock that night, me an' Dismal ride into that little camp on Kirby Crick, over beyond the Honeycombs. A roarin' pitch-pine fire throws crazy shadows that dance against the hemmin' screen of pines, an' the song of the rushin' stream has a friendly, soothin' sound. Eight men are squattin' around that blaze—ringin' a blanket on which are cards an' chips an' gold money.

Altogether, it's a scene that allus has appealed to me. Strong, free men livin' off the wilds, beddin' down under the stars an' thumbin' their noses at the favoritism of an unbalanced world where a few have too much an' to hell with them that have nothin'. But there's something here that damps my full appreciation. One look is enough to show me what it is.

Never, in all my years of saddle bummin', have I met as wicked lookin' a crew. They're settin' there, tense an' watchful after Dismal's owlhoot, with their hands on their smoke-wagons an' killer lights in their eyes. Every one deep branded with the renegade iron an' as chilly an' unsmilin' as the embrace of Death.

ON ORDER, we park our ponies with the rest, down along the crick, an' walk back to join 'em. Dismal makes a nice little speech, givin' me a real send-off. Then I'm takin' the leader's hand in the game whilst him an' Dismal retire for a consultation, as the medico said. An' somehow after one look into the yellow-edged eyes of Chang Gargan an' the way he squints at me as Dismal whispers sweet nothin's into his ear, I can't take a whole lot of interest in the game. Every once in a while, Gargan's low chuckle stings my ear. Cripes! Just what is this I've got into?

There's a jug passin' around an' the forty-rod soon allays my skittishness. About midnight two of the boys get into an augerment an' are reaching for their cutters when I get a look at the real Chang Gargan. He comes roarin' down onto them two like a one-man cyclone. He floors one final with a loopin' swing. Then laughin' an' cussin', he dishes out one of the most artistic lacin's ever I've seen a man take.

"Want fight, do yuh?" he bellers. "All right, you likker-swillin' louse, you'll get it. Take that an' that an' that. An' that!"

He knocks the feller down, jerks him to his feet an' knocks him down again, until the man can't stand up at all. Then Gargan kicks him under the chin, an' dusts off his hands. "Now hit yore blankets, you bench-legged centipedes. We've got work to do tomorrow."

As we're stretchin' out around the fire, Dismal rolls close an' whispers a warnin'. "That's Chang, Tensleep. Fer God's sake don't r'ile him."

It's a waste of breath. After that sample, not one of them hellions would have crossed that man-breaker for money. Next mornin', at breakfast an' after, them tough gun-slammers are like kittens fawnin' about the big he-tomcat. An' the same goes for the two who had displeased him the night before. There's venison for dinner an' then the gang stretches out to laze an' doze away the afternoon. The sun is settin' when we finish the evenin' meal. An' then Chang Gargan comes out with it.

Says he: "Boy's we'll ride for Big Hole City, shovin' in from this side, crossin' the river at the ford an' leavin' the ponies with Deuce Raidler an' the new man, Jones. The rest of you will go with me to do what has to be done. That's as far as we'll plan it now. Dismal, you ride on ahead to scout the lay. Rest of you boys get leather on yore cayuses!"

Dismal screws on a kak an' roars away. An' after while nine of us follow him, Chang Gargan leadin' us at an easy hand lope. Dusk is usherin' in the night as we splash across the river and ride up a cut-bank coulee that borders the town on the south. Mebby twenty-five rods along that coulee, Dismal comes out to flag us.

"Right here!" he whispers, hoarse. "King Dawson's playin' poker in the Sho-shone Saloon. Town's mostly at supper. It's a cinch."

"Light down boys," orders Gargan. "Deuce, you an' Jones hold the ponies, head to head. Five each. An' don't get 'em scrambled, understand. We may come out in a hurry, with a yen to whack leather the same way. Jones, if we come down here with hawsses, I'll look to you an' Deuce to take over. The rest of us will cover yore trail. You savvy?"

"Cripes!" I complain. "You mean to say yo're goin' after a bunch of fast broncs—afoot?"

"You guess good, feller!" he growls. "Now shut up an' foller orders. C'mon, you owlhooters. This is what you've bin askin' for; now let's see you cut it."

He leads 'em up the bank, then silence settles, broken only by the snortin' of the ponies we're holdin'.

"Damndest mess uh hawss rustlin' ever I mixed up into," I complain, plenty sure

by now that somethin' is wrong—dead wrong.

"Shut up!" raps Deuce. "You wanta draw the lightnin' down onto us?"

It's an ugly snarl he gives me. An' I'm suddenly feelin' awful lonely—a feelin' I almost never have when I'm in my own good company. I clamp onto my tongue an' drop my hand down close to my cutter. Better if I'd never teamed up with this outfit but, as long as I have, I've gotta go plumb through with 'em.

Standin' there, I'm holdin' the bridle bits of the five ponies an' tryin' to ease my troubled mind, when there comes a sly rustlin' in the low willows an' wild rose nearby. I snap my head around to stare at the sound. A dingy shape comes crawlin' out. In the early gloom, it looks like a bear. My fingers close around my gun butt, then jerk away as I hear a thin, boyish voice.

"Howdy, mister. What yuh doin' with the horses?"

Whee-ew! I let out a gust of trapped breath an' my voice goes sorta weak. "Hullo, Kid. I'm—I'm holdin' 'em. What are you doin' here?"

He crawls up onto his legs an' pokes over. "Me?" he grins. "I've been settin' my rabbit snares. What you holdin' them broncs for?"

"So they won't run away," I murmur. "But nobody's holdin' you, so you better do what these ponies would do if I turned 'em loose—run away."

"Yeah," grins the kid, a manly little fellow about fourteen years old. "My ma will be whalin' the daylights outa me if I'm late to supper. But when I see ponies, I just got to look 'em over." He's strokin' Rusty's neck, affectionate. "This here one's a fast one, I betcha. But not as fast as my dad's Bally. . . ."

"Bally hawsses are all fast," I tell him, thinkin' of one I lost once. "But you better be faster if you don't want that larrupin'."

"What the hell you doin', feller?" comes Deuce Raidler's voice through the gloom. "Tryin' to talk yoreself into somethin'?"

"Yeah," I laugh, nervous. "Reckon I'm gettin' loco." And then to the boy: "Get outa here, kid. Beat it!"

"Who's that feller?" the youngster asks, curious. "An' how long you goin' to hold these ponies here?"

"Who's that you're talkin' to?" demands Deuce, an' he leads his mounts around to where he can see. "Oh-ho! Some yearlin' kid, eh? What you doin' here, boy? Who sent you down here to spy on us?"

THE little feller dips down an' comes up with a hand full of rock. "Don't talk like that to me, you snarly scissorbill!" he raps shrilly. "Gimme some more of that fightin' talk an' I'll knock yore horns down."

Deuce takes a step to'rds him, his hand swingin' back for a punishin' blow. But I brush the kid back, protestin'.

"Hold on, Deuce! Don't go slappin' no kid here an' now. Talk about drawin' down the lightnin'! You want him squawlin' all over the place?"

"Let him try it," rages the fightin' little fool. "I can knock over a rabbit with a rock at twenty-five yards. What you think I can do to a face like his?"

"Quit that kinda talk, kid!" I order, takin' the bristlin' youngster by the arm. Then Deuce, bridlin' an' fumin', grows suddenly silent as a shrill, sharp whistle sounds atop the cutbank.

Our eyes flash yonderly. Nothin'.

"Hear that?" husks Deuce.

"Somebody whistled," announces the boy.

"Shut up!" commands Deuce. An' then to me: "Jones, let that kid hold them ponies! You slide up an' see what's up."

Which I'm glad to do, havin' worked myself almost into the trigger-slammin'

spasms. "Hold 'em like this," I tell the youngster. "An' don't let 'em get loose, will yuh?"

He laughs, salty. "Any time Shortgun Cordes can't hold five ponies, partner, he'll turn in his star an' make room for a real lawman. Go on an' git that look outa yore system. It's only someone whistlin'."

Mighty brave talk for a button, and somethin' solid enough to fill me with curiosity. But it'll have to wait till I see what's up. Mebby Gargan an' the rest walked right into a trap. Mebby we're lettin' 'em git around us, right now.

I take a few quick steps toward the trail up the cutbank when behind me the kid callin' himself Shortgun Cordes barks a shrill warning: "Look out—partner!"

I'm that keyed up, them words drop me like I'm shot, drawin' an' whirlin' as I fall. Back yonder, at the horses, the starlight glints along the flashin' barrel of Deuce Raidler's gun. An', while I can't understand a feller bein' so blood-sweatin' or so plumb crazy, I know he's figgerin' to kill that boy, whose only sin was to blunder into the business of a hawss raid. Well, Deuce ain't that way long. I thumb Ol' Meat-in-the-Skillet just once, an' I don't miss. Deuce never even groans as he falls an' I'm up an' leapin' back to snatch them five reins from his nerveless hand.

Everything seems to happen all at once then. Back up in the town there's high yells, some shots an' a bell starts tollin'. Gargan an' his boys come poppin' over the cutbank, each man for his own hawss.

"Nice work, boys!" Gargan is sayin'. "We cleaned that bank like guttin' a rabbit. An' a nice word to you too, Deuce. Purty soft to have the town find Tensleep Maxon a-layin' here so they will know it was his gang done the job. Hullo. . . .!"

He spots the boy an' grabs him by the arm. "Who in the hell are you?"

The little feller, caught up in a sudden rush of trouble, has stood his ground, holdin' onto the five ponies till the boys took 'em from him. Straightforward, he says: "I'm Shortgun Cordes! Who are you?"

"Shortgun Cordes!" mutters Gargan. "Oh-h-h. . . . The deputy sheriff's kid, eh?"

"Beef him, Chang, an' le's get goin'," raps one of the outlaws.

"Beef this kid?" taunts the leader. "Don't be crazy. He's just the protection the doctor ordered for us. Dismal, put him into Tensleep's saddle an' stay beside him as we ride. Now roll some spur!"

There's confusion, as men fork nervous broncs, with the youngster cussin' as he swings his fists at Dismal, who drags him over to Rusty an' lifts him into the leather. From the bank comes a bull-bellerin' voice.

"It's the Tensleep Maxon bunch! I saw 'em boys. Got one of 'em too. Looked to me like it was Tensleep himself that I plugged. There they go. . . .!" An' his six-shooter is sprayin' lead into the night.

Cripes! Nobody's takin' no notice of me as I swing up onto Deuce Raidler's pony. An' it's good they ain't. I'm so flabbergasted it must show in every line of me. There's some things that I ain't yet clear about. But, also, there's some that are. Gargan left Deuce with the horses to kill me. An' the Cordes kid saved me instead of himself when he yipped that warning. Now here I am, laggin' behind the racin' outlaws, with every chance to swerve out of a cold-deck game where I've been tolled by a gent callin' himself my friend. But, with the night beggin' me to burn a hole through it in a fast getaway from the Gargan Gang, I just keep tailin' that procession of fleeing outlaws.

That boy saved me. How in the hell can I leave him to his fate—an' ever live with myself again?

IT'S A crooked course Chang Gargan leads us along, an' a hawss-killin' pace. I haven't the slightest idea where we're heading, or what will happen when we get there. But one thing I'm hopin' for: to get hold of that boy an' dust with him before Gargan's crew find it was Deuce who died back yonder. So I drag along behind Dismal, waiting for him to get careless. Which he don't.

Nary a chance have I had to shake the kid loose when, hours later, we clatter through a narrow slot that opens into a round, cliff-hemmed hole. The smell of lush grass an' water growth is on the air; horses whinny a greetin' an' go scuddin' ahead of us under the stars. Cabins loom up out of the gloom and the crew dismounts.

"Well, boys," Chang Gargan chortles. "That's one trail that won't be soon followed. Bill Cordes won't be here before tomorrow night, even if he starts at dawn. An', by then, we'll be long gone. Salty, you uncork a jug. King Dawson orta be here directly an' we'll all do some drinkin' while we divvy this bank money. Dismal, you take the kid into the strong room an' lock him up. He'll be somethin' to swap if the law traps one or more of us. Mac, you an' Deuce take over the guardin' of the gap. I'll send two boys down to spell you in a couple of hours. . . ."

"Have all the fun you can, you polecat!" shrilled the boy, who twisted in Dismal's grasp. "My dad'll hunt yuh down like a bunch of snakes an' stomp yore scaley hides. . . ."

"Shut yore mouth!" raps Dismal, fellin' the youngster with a blow. "More talk like that an' we'll leave yore carcass for yore dad to find an' bury."

They laugh as Dismal jerks the little feller up, an' then boots him reelin' to'rds the middle house of the three. I'm fumin' inside an' strugglin' to keep from pluggin' the treacherous Dismal, grabbin' the boy an' makin' a suicide fight of it. In turnin' my pony into the corral with the rest, I feel like doom has ketched up to me. Anyhow, I jerk a carbine an' sling of ca'tridges from Deuce's saddle an' straggle after the big gent called Mac.

He's a stingy-lipped jigger, which suits me just fine. Neither of us says a word till we hit the slot. Then he says: "You take that side, Deuce; I'll take this," an' sets down under a bush.

I grunt an' drop down across from him. An' there we set, listenin' to the risin' sounds of debauch at the cabins—Mac mournin' a little that he's missin' it, me worryin' about a brave little kid trapped in a wolf den.

After a while a risin' beat of hoofs comes driftin' up the slot. Then there's a owl hoot an' a lone rider lopes up.

"It's Sheriff Dawson," growls Mac. "Shore is nice havin' the law on our side fer a one-tenth cut."

I grunt, sarcastic, as the rider flashes past us an' onto the cabins. I've never had much respect fer the run of sheriffs. But a traitor to the people who pay him is about as low as the breed ever gets. Down at the cabins a door swings open an' Sheriff King Dawson stands silhouetted in the portal.

"Gargan," he barks, his voice rollin' across the flat. "What double-crossin' game are you playin'? You had Dismal tell me you'd beef Tensleep Maxon an' leave his carcass in the coulee if I'd arrange to have the bank vault open. I done my part, an'—"

"An' I done mine, Dawson!" roars the big outlaw. "What's eatin' you?"

"The body you left to make a fool of me was Deuce Raidler!"

"Yo're crazy! I just sent Deuce an' Mac down to guard the gap."

Momentary silence. Then: "So that's it?" hums the sheriff. "That means we've got that fox, Tensleep, snoopin' around here."

"Snoopin' hell!" bellers Gargan. "He's likely downed Mac an' is on his way to fetch in a posse. After him, you boys! If you have to, ride to hell to get him!"

The words ain't even out when I'm stabbin' for my gun. But surprise has cost me the split second that spells the difference between success and failure. Across from me a gun barrel gives back the light an' Mac is snarlin'.

"Get 'em up, feller! Didn't think you acted like ol' Deuce. Elevate, or I'll drill yuh!"

"Don't know yet why I didn't draw an' smoke it out. Mebby it's the thought of the kid an' his chances, when I'm layin' stark an' stiff. But what chance has he got now, I ask myself, with my holster empty an' Mac's gun in my back as he marches me down to the cabins?

A great gasp sobs from their lungs as Mac shoves me inside. Then Dismal raises a yell of triumph. "Good work, Mac! There's Tensleep, Chang—the gent that murdered Deuce Raidler!"

Gargan plants himself before me, his eyes murderous. "Indigent Jones, eh?" he sneers. "You fooled us, feller, but—"

"You fooled yourself, Gargan," I tell him. "It was a sweet game—if it had worked."

"Throw him into the strong room!" explodes Gargan. "After we've split this money I'll put on a show fer you boys. I'll show yuh how I serve a skunk that crosses me."

Dismal leaps to open a heavy log door. Mac prods me past the table where gold an' silver an' long green money is stacked high. Dismal, grinnin' like a cougar over a kill, throws the door open. But Mac don't shove me into the dark room beyond it. Not just then, he don't. For out of that darkness leaps Shortgun Cordes. His eyes are narrowed to slits; an' in his hand is a yawnin' smoke wagon—cocked!

"Hands up, you snake-trackin' coyotes!" he shrills.

Mac shifts his gun from my kidney to the kid. Shortgun triggers, the bullet droppin' Mac with a tunneled shoulder. Before he hits the floor, I snatch his cutter an' let it go into the guts of Dismal Crane, whose gun is throwin' down on the boy.

Two clockticks an' two men down! It stops them for a brief moment. An' my foot lashes out, tippin' over table, money, lamp an' the sheriff.

As blackness claims the room, I'm shooting at Gargan. An, a renegade stampede is threatenin' to take out the log door jams.

"Quick, Shortgun!" I whisper at the kid, an' him an' me make a quick dash out the rear door. Outside, it's only about thirty feet back to rocks an' brush. Me an' the little feller have just flopped there when Gargan an' his boys are throwin' a circle of guns around the cabin.

"Come out, you two!" he bellers. "I'll give you just one minute to come out with hands up. Otherwise, I'll burn the shack over yore heads!"

Beside me, Shortgun Cordes chuckles with kid delight an' squeezes my arm. An' so, with a gent bellyin' to the cabin wall an' kindlin' a fire, me an' the boy start edgin' toward the gap before the firelight betrays us. Reckon we'd have made it too, except the kid trips on a brush root, an' falls flat, his cocked gun goin' off.

HE'S CUSSIN' like a trooper, when I jerk him to his feet an' hustle him through the low brush rimmin' the bowl. Behind us, silence gives way to wild yells an' shots. Lead whines an' drones about us, clippin' brush an' gearin' us to a high lope. Glancin' behind, I can see 'em racin' after us, their forms dark against the first glow of the fired cabin. But Gargan stops 'em.

"Come back here, yuh fools!" he raps. "We'll get them two antelopes, but first we've gotta put out this fire. The money's in there, on the floor!"

They turn back to help him fight that growin' blaze. Which gives me an' the boy a chance to get into the shelter of the slot. An' there, right where they lay when Mac throwed down on me, is Deuce's Winchester an' a full sling of ca'tridges. How good they feel. Gargan is fightin' a losin' fight at the cabin.

Once, when it looks like they're gainin', Shortgun Cordes says: "I'm gonna scatter them polecats, partner. That cabin's gotta burn. My dad will see it an' come a-shootin'. What he'll do to that crooked boss uh his . . . ."

His gun speaks, with mine answerin'. Lead screams past the cabin an' them fire fighters scatter. But soon, with the cabin doomed, they come anglin' to'rds us—duckin' below the sparse talus brush an' sendin' occasional shots over our heads.

The fire mounts, castin' a pink glow over the hideaway. They can't hide from us, with them rays at their backs. So, when they get too close, I do a little shootin' on my own. I drop one thick bodied gent that looks like the sheriff. *Quien sabe?* An' another one who tries to charge us on a hawss. That cures 'em of that. But after awhile I get worried.

"Button," I tell the boy. "I'll stay here an' hold 'em busy. An' you better be soon out of here, just in case . . . ."

"I'll stay with yuh to the last ca'tridge," he grits savage.

"That's fine of you, kid," I applaud. "But it's best that you get your dad an' his posse here. Suppose you slide out the gap, climb that peak yonder an' build up a good signal fire. I reckon your dad could see that, even if he's missed the cabin blaze."

"There's an idea," he enthuses, an' sticks his gun into his waistband. Then, for a minute he studies, thoughtful.

"What is it?" I ask him.

"Lissen," he says, pleadin'. "If my dad comes in here, fer gosh sakes, don't tell him about me havin' a gun."

"Why not?" I grin, tickled at his nerve.

"I bin borrowin' it," he confesses. "Takin' it from my dad's gun case, without his knowin'. I've shot a heap uh rabbits with it, partner. But my dad will shore whale me if he finds out."

"I won't tell him," I promise, an' we shake hands on it. Like a little warrior, he stalks out into the night.

I don't know how long I lay there in the slot, snipin' at skulkin' figures an' listenin' to danger sounds in the draggin' night. From them sounds, I know there's men posted on the hillsides both sides of the gap. Which means that dawn will see me rubbed out, unless I make myself scarce before that. In which case the renegades will make a run for it. It's nerve-wrackin', waitin' out a dawn that sometimes pops wide open without much warnin', with the fire burned down an' the outlaws ominously silent.

But all things come to an end. The darkness seems to fade an' I start to fade with it—down to'rds the mouth of the gap. Gotta make some noise, which draws lead from the hillsides.

Certain sheriffs has spoke of Tensleep's luck. They never spoke truer, for only luck could have got me outa that. I'm duckin' an' dodgin' down that slot, with bullets makin' chaos all around me. Yet never a lead touches my hide. I'm doin' a good imitation of a jack rabbit, about a hundred yards from the entrance, when the battle starts.

Ahead of me, high yellin' busts loose, an' a blast of lead sears them hillsides. All shootin' at me stops an' men on both sides are callin' warnings an' bustin down the brush to'rds their ponies. Dawn is breakin' an' a roar of many hoofs is shakin' the air. Spurrin' riders are splittin' the gap an' smokin' up the hillsides, sendin' showers of stones rollin' down onto me an' drivin' the Badwater Gang back.

Me, bein' sort of an outcast to both sides, not knowin' how the tide of battle's

goin' or what to do about it if I did, I set down with my back against a rock. I'm wishin' I had a pony an' seein' no way of makin' my wish come true. An' I'll be a centipede's sister if the pony I'm wishin' for don't come trottin' around the bend below. It's one uh them Morgan-Hambletonian crosses that Dismal used as bait to lure me into a gunshot grave. A trim chestnut sorrel, with the fine head an' full, deep chest of the Morgan an' the slim barrel an' long runnin' legs of the Kentucky breed. Just the critter for me to make a fast getaway upon, except that Shortgun Cordes is settin' astride him, his cocked pistol in his hand.

"I'm throwin' in my gun with my dad's," he says, stiff. "He told me to stay behind. But if anything was—was to happen to him. . . ." His lip trembles.

I talk soothin' to him, more to hold him than for any other reason, as gunfire roars to the sky, swellin' to a peak as the sun rises then dyin' out altogether. Not long afterward, we hear hawsses comin' an' the boy sticks his gun inside his shirt, guiltily.

Around the bend comes a grim young feller with a star on his breast an' the same hard jaw an' straight gazin' eyes that mark the kid. Behind him ride a score of his men, with two of the Badwater Gang—just two. The deputy starts at sight of his boy an' scowls at me.

"You shouldn't have come this close, Billy," he scolds. "Who is this man?"

As the kid hesitates, one of the two captives raps: "I'll tell you who he is. That's Tensleep Maxon—the leader of the Badwater Gang. He got us all into this mess."

The kid flares up an' I can see the workin's of his clear young mind. "Don't lie, partner," I warn him. "Never lie."

"Yes," acknowledges Billy Cordes. "This is Tensleep, but not the leader of this gang. I heard King Dawson talkin'. Him an' a man called Gargan was leaders. They roped Tensleep into this, figgerin' to kill him an' leave his carcass down yonder to throw the law off the track. Tensleep ain't no renegade polecat. He rode up here instead of clearin' out—just to help me. Him an' me kept them snakes holed up here for you to nab. He's the best partner ever I've had."

"That's not for you and me to judge, Billy," says his dad, gentle. An' then to me: "Sorry, Maxon, but I reckon I'll have to take you in."

An that boy lays his ears back. "Oh, no you don't!" he barks, an' out comes that long smokepole with a flourish. "You boys will take him over my dead carcass!" He steps out of the saddle, coverin' 'em. "Climb onto my pony, Tensleep," he tells me. "An' get outa here—fast. I'll cover yore getaway. The rest of you horsebackers reach for the sky!"

"Billy!" says his father, stern. "That's my gun. Where'd you get it?"

"Swiped it outa yore case," barks the youngster, honest. "Don't make me use it."

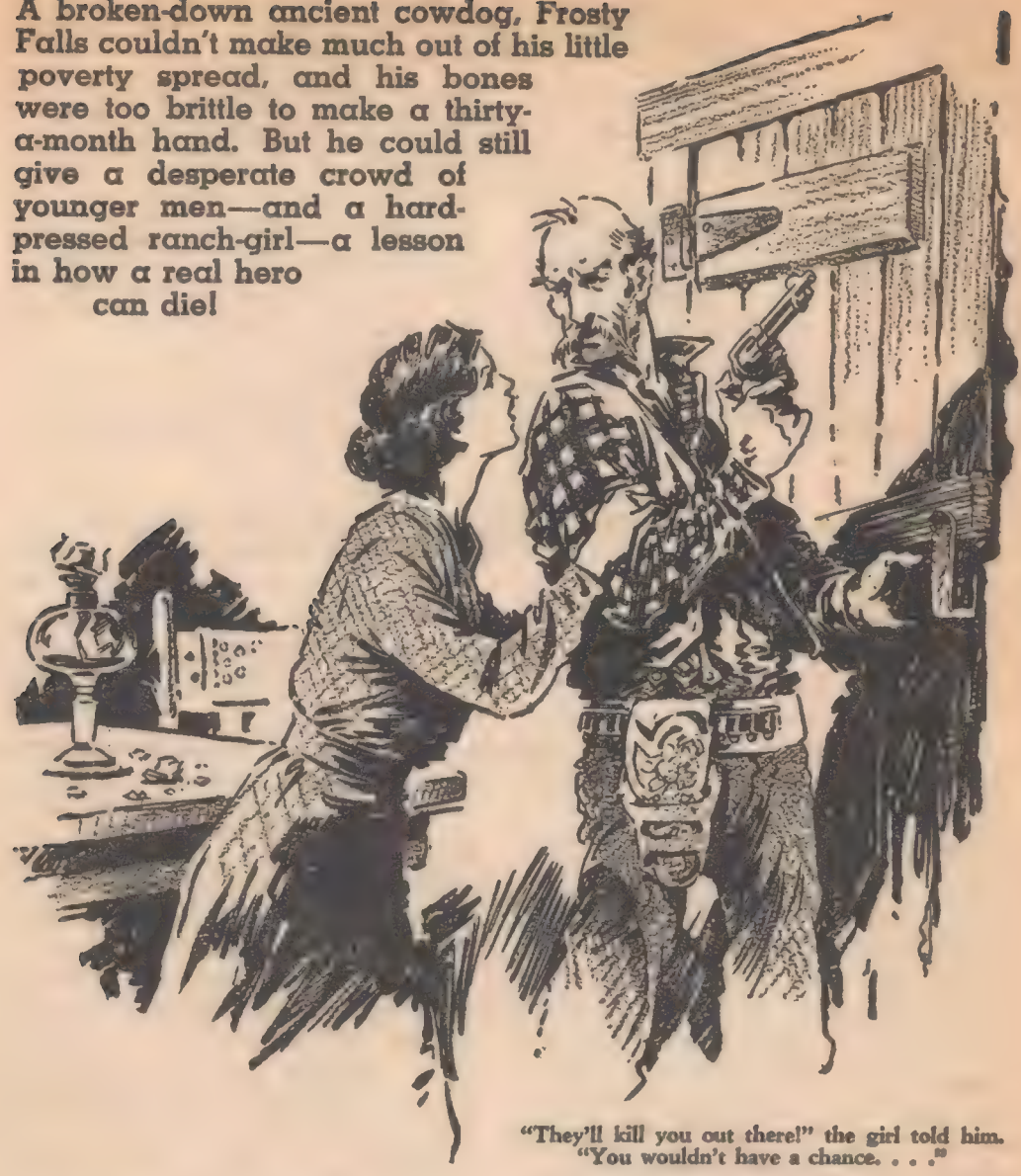
A proud smile flickers on Bill Cordes' straight lips. "I reckon he means it, an' we better like it, boys," he says, liftin' his hands. The rest foller suit. I reach for the kid's free hand, grip it fervent an' crawl into his saddle.

"Good-bye, an' good luck, Button," I tell him. "An' thanks for side-partnerin' me. I'll remember it."

Whereupon I'm giggin' that lightning-fast hawss around the bend, out of the gap an' into the timber to'rds the Hole-in-the-Wall. Savorin' a memory that's never to leave me—the memory of a fearless, fightin' little button. How far can a kid go, with that kind of courage, in a world that's cryin' for it? I often wonder what destiny held for Billy Cordes—the kid that called himself "Shortgun."

The unforgettable Tensleep Maxon, as well as many other salty, life-like characters of the Old West appear every month in *Dime Western*—"The World's Leading Western Magazine." Next issue on sale March 1st!

A broken-down ancient cowdog, Frosty Falls couldn't make much out of his little poverty spread, and his bones were too brittle to make a thirty-a-month hand. But he could still give a desperate crowd of younger men—and a hard-pressed ranch-girl—a lesson in how a real hero can die!



"They'll kill you out there!" the girl told him. "You wouldn't have a chance. . . ."

OLD HELL-ON-WHEELS

By RAY NAFZIGER

FROSTY FALLS' faded old eyes studied the letter from Cutbank McBain. He shook his head, his white, beetling brows knitted. "A son of mine, bearin' the honored an' respected name of Falls," he muttered sorrowfully, "gittin' hisself in a jam where he might enjoy six or eight years' vacation in the state pen. An' consortin' with a treacherous, skirt-wearin' she-Judas, lurin' Lon on into prison. Damn Cutbank McBain fer not goin' into particulars, anyhow!" he swore, speaking to himself, like many men that live alone.

Frosty scratched the gray hairs of his head, then vigorously shoved away a pet

hand-raised bull calf playfully butting him, while simultaneously pushing off a frolicsome collie pawing his chest.

"Golram it, git off me, you critters!" he bellowed, backing to the corral gate for protection. "Gimme a chance to think, will yuh? There never lived such a put-on feller as me," he complained.

Frosty growled, but fear was clutching his heart. Lon, all he had left in the world, that ambitious young son who had lately been made manager of the big Five Spoke Ranch, was now headed into prison trouble, according to Cutbank McBain who cooked for the same outfit. And Cutbank wasn't one to get excited; if Cutbank admitted Lon was in danger, the chances were that Lon already had his neck in a hang-noose.

"I'm the most put-on feller whut ever lived," Frosty muttered. "Right now with work pressin', I got t' go over an' git a wu'thless son of mine out of the clutches of a designin' Delilah."

His preparations for the journey were brief. He took his six-shooter, rifle, a slicker roll, cinched his worn old hull on San Juan, his sorrel—named after the Spanish War battle in which Frosty had taken part as Rough Rider—and departed.

Stopping at his nearest neighbor, he gave Antonio Escudero exact directions on the care and feeding of the livestock on Frosty's handkerchief-sized ranch, a few cattle, the one remaining saddle horse, a flock of chickens and the collie.

After which Frosty pointed San Juan's nose toward the Five Spoke Ranch, over in the Candelario Mountains. He covered fifty miles yet that day, and the next he covered sixty-five, reaching his destination in the late afternoon, a little stiff but sitting his saddle as jauntily as a youth of eighteen.

Five Spoke Ranch, snuggled in a canyon mouth under the high Candelarios, provided a spread of adobe buildings and pole corrals that would do the heart of any cowman good. Lon had done well by himself to get the job of managing such a big outfit.

From a shed covering a chuck-wagon, there came the familiar and harsh strains of prolonged swearing, emanating from some unseen person greasing the vehicle. Frosty pulled his horse up close to the wagon and let out a squall.

CUTBANK McBAIN, a small man almost hidden behind two overgrown mustaches, popped his head out from behind the wagon. "What the hell is all the noise about?" he demanded of his old acquaintance. "Is Geronimo out gatherin' skelps, you long-necked, hip-sweenied, shell-backed old hell-raiser?"

"Who's a hell-raiser?" demanded Frosty. "Why, I never got in trouble in my life, 'ceptin' a time or so when I was put on so much that a cooin' dove couldn't endure it no more"

The two men, both a little past seventy, eyed each other belligerently. "All right, you're a cooin' dove, Mister Falls," said Cutbank McBain ironically. "Want somebody to help lift yuh off that ol' sorrel cougar-bait yuh're ridin'?"

"In the fu'st place, my name ain't Falls over yere," said Frosty. "It's—lemme see—um—well—uh, Smith. Frosty Smith. In the second place, I wouldn't of come if I'd thought that I'd have to burn out my insides on yore cookin'. Savin' a son ain't wu'th that much sacrifice. Where-at is Lon?"

"How the hell would I know, 'cept he's off somewheres on one of the two-hundred-fifty-odd thousand acres of this range," answered Cutbank. "He'll be in for chuck come supper time; yuh'd git lost huntin' him on a outfit this size."

"Whut yuh mean—a outfit this size?" sneered Frosty. "In my day, I rode for ranches where this Five Spoke range wouldn't of been big enough for the hoss

pasture. I could run this outfit with a busted leg and the sole help of a pint of whiskey each mornin'. Now, what was that letter o' yores all about?"

"Nothin' to git excited over," said Cutbank. "I just said it looked as if Lon was goin' to draw hisself a few years of a weanin' diet of bread an' water, tryin' to help a girl t'other side the mountain build up her herd. Nothin' in it to cause yuh to barge over here like a loonatic, was there?"

"No," admitted Frosty. "But I know that if yuh said it was cloudin' up for a drizzle, likely the water's already standin' a foot deep on the level. Yuh always was a aggravatin' underdescribin' horntoad. Now hand it to me straight."

The cook looked about him cautiously. "I can't; it's all under cover yet. I jist heard a word here an' a word there, and I can smell how things is bustin'. Lon's been hogtied by a gal rancher named Lela Maxwell, an' as I git it, there's a deal on for her to git some Five Spoke cattle free. Nobuddy could blame a ranch manager for givin' a few dogie calfs to a pretty neighbor, but these is full-growed steers. Right now there's a dumb detective on this ranch, posin' as a cowboy but watchin' to git his fingers on Lon. And anyway, what could a wore-out, busted-down, hip-shot old cuss like yuh do about it?"

"Plenty," said Frosty confidently. "But first I figger to do a little detectin' myself. I see yuh're gittin' this chuckwagon greased for round-up. Lon, I reckon, has a range foreman under him? Who is he?"

"A loud-mouth slab o' gristle called Bull Cawdrey."

"With the right to hire men as needed?"

"Natcherally. But yuh don't think yuh'd assay for a ridin' job?" scoffed Cutbank. "They'd have to lift yuh out from under yore tarp ev'ry mornin' an' thaw yuh out over the fire. Howsomever, if yuh're askin' for a job, there's Bull now."

A rider had appeared at the corrals and dismounting, strode along now, batwing chaps flapping, a cigar set at a cocky angle in his big mouth. Frosty took an instant dislike to Bull Cawdrey, but that was nothing against Cawdrey. Frosty took an instant dislike to most people he met, changing his opinion with dogged reluctance. As Cawdrey approached, a swaggering six-feet-three, with shoulders to match, Frosty spoke up.

"How do I look for a job on yore round-up?" he inquired.

Cawdrey gazed at Frosty and grinned contemptuously. Then he guffawed and rolled his cigar to the northwest corner of his mouth. "The trail to the old pioneer's home," he said insultingly, "runs right past the corrals. Half a mile on they keep ambulances with spring mattresses waitin'."

"Jist whut I tol' him," put in Cutbank McBain, whose hobby was butting in on other people's talk. "This outfit can't use no rhoomatic old turtles."

Cawdrey ignored Cutbank. "I am kinda short on help, an' yuh look like yuh've built a few loops in yore time, but that time must 'a' been long ago."

"He's so old he creaks," put in the cook again. "Yuh don't want no old cockroach like that around this outfit."

Before Frosty could light in on Cutbank, Cawdrey himself opened up. "Who the hell's range foreman here—me or you?" he bellowed at the cook. "I don't need a cussed biscuit mixer to tell me who to hire. What's yore name, Grandpappy?"

"Frosty Smith," lied Frosty Falls glibly, ignoring the "Grandpappy" insult. "An' b'God, I don't ask no favors from horse, country nor nobuddy. I'll make yuh a proposition: Anytime I don't do something a younger man could do—I don't bar nothin'—yuh can collect five dollars off'n my pay, as a sorta personal bet between us."

BULL CAWDREY considered this generous offer. He couldn't lose. This old coot would go down on the payroll as a hand, but he'd be handing over most of his wages to Cawdrey.

"All right; that's a bargain," he said. "At the end of the month, yuh'll be owin' me more money than yore wages. Find yoreself a bunk."

Frosty turned on Cutbank after Cawdrey had swaggered away. "Whut yuh mean by tryin' to gum up my gittin' a job?" he demanded.

"I was a-helpin' yuh," explained the cook. "The way to git Bull t'do something is to talk ag'in it. He allus goes t'other way of the rope."

Frosty, admitting there might have been wisdom in Cutbank's strategy, descended and helped the cook grease the round-up wagon and load it with chuck from the store room. Meanwhile he kept an eye open for Lon.

If a girl really was making a fool out of Lon, he, Frosty, would wring her dodgasted neck. Using her dirty wiles to ruin a upstandin' feller like Lon. Named Lela Maxwell, hey? He'd once known a Maxwell back in Texas and he was a fellow you couldn't turn your back on. Probably a bad strain in the whole Maxwell tribe.

Toward dark when Lon rode in whistling, Frosty hurried to meet him at the corrals. Lon's eyes opened wide in astonishment, then his face lit up.

"Dad!" he exclaimed, and then looked still more surprised as Frosty said, "Ssh! I ain't yore dad here. Treat me like a plumb stranger. I'm goin' as Frosty Smith, an' I got a ridin' job from Bull Cawdrey."

"Forgit a job," ordered Lon. "You'll bunk with me; loaf an' chaw the fat with Cutbank durin' the day. I been tryin' to git yuh away from livin' alone on that two-bit chicken ranch of yours. If you needed money, why didn't yuh write?"

"When did I ever ask anybuddy for money?" inquired Frosty. "I don't need none; I jist got a cravin' to ride on round-up ag'in."

"You'll bust your neck," said Lon. "These mountains is plumb dangerous."

"Whut mountains?" scoffed his father. "They wouldn't be nothin' but a gentle rollin' plain where I've rode. If we'd found somethin' like these Candelarios, we'd of built us a race track on 'em."

Lon studied his father suspiciously. "What you up to, anyhow?" he asked. "Goin' by a fake name? Are yuh on the dodge again?"

"No, I ain't on the dodge," returned Frosty peevishly. "When was I ever on the dodge? Them few times I changed my name and drifted, I jist decided I didn't want to pay out good money to bum lawyers. Now, shet up; I got me a job."

And there was where Lon had to leave it; when Frosty headed somewhere, all hell and Geronimo couldn't turn him.

The round-up left next morning, with Frosty helping the wrangler take the cavvy along the mesquite foothills below the mountains. Cutbank McBain was driving the wagon over by a round-about road; Cawdrey, the range foreman, and the other riders would follow in the afternoon. Seen at closer range, Frosty had to admit that the Candelario Mountains did kind of rear back a mite; and if you got rimmed up, a parachute would be the only way to get down.

Two blankets, a quilt and a tarp he found a poor substitute that night for the bed on his ranch, with an Ever-Sink mattress that he had adopted when a comfort-loving rancher-neighbor had left the country to go back East.

When he rolled out, he didn't have much appetite either. But a full stomach was no asset anyway in topping off bad broncs, which there'd likely be some of in his string.

During breakfast Lon rode in from

headquarters to stay on the round-up. Cawdrey's job was to look after the actual range work, but Lon wasn't the kind of a manager to sit in an office. He and Bull Cawdrey were just barely on speaking terms; Cawdrey was jealous because Lon had been brought in and made manager over his head.

Cawdrey had indicated Frosty's string of mounts, and Frosty flipped his loop on the one handiest to drop his rope, a hammer-headed roan. The horse was meek enough in saddling up, but a hellion under a rider.

"Here's where I collect five dollars," Frosty heard Cawdrey jeer. "No coot old as him can ride that horse."

Lon hurried over. "Hold on there, old-timer," he said. "I'll step up on that horse first; he's got a bad name."

Frosty was justly insulted. "Will yuh git the hell away and not be interferin' with a man's string of hosses?" he growled. He climbed up, and took more churning than he had remembered could be hidden in any one horsehide. There was nothing fancy about the roan's pitching; he merely hammered the ground as if he were trying in real earnest to bust through the crust. All of the bad horses he had ridden came back to plague Frosty, but he stuck, as he knew he would.

THEY rode out, climbing up a steep trail into the high rims, where a treacherous brush-tangled rocky slope awaited them. Near the top they lit a bear grass bush and took the stiffness out of their ropes. The cold went plumb through Frosty, but he managed to keep his teeth from chattering.

This mountain round-up was no round-up at all; it was a plain, simple cow-hunt and most of the cattle were as wild as deer. They had to be tracked and chased down, roped and necked up to a tree, to be led down a day or so later.

Some cowboy spotted the white spot of a Hereford off in the brush, and the next instant they caught a hurried glimpse of bovine backs slipping up over a ridge. They were off then, riding like hellions. The hammerhead under Frosty was a real rock horse and carried his light rider ahead of the rest.

When Frosty caught a flash of a big black steer ahead, he raked the roan with his spurs and they shot clatteringly across a rocky slope. The roan had the cattle-chasing fever in his blood. Winded, the black steer hid out, but when Frosty tracked him to his covert, they were off again, hoofs drumming the rocks, bodies crashing through brush.

Plunging down, Frosty closed in and built a stingy loop. Beyond, a brushy canyon offered sure escape for the steer, but Frosty had one chance and only one to rope the animal—on a steep hillside where he shouldn't have been roped. But Frosty, who tied his rope tight and trusted to luck, dropped his little loop over the steer's head, and swung his horse.

The roan would have made it, but at a critical moment the rocks skidded treacherously out from under his hoofs. As the beefy black steer tightened the rope, both horse and rider went over. The steer turned to charge the fallen horse and man, and only a small tree snagging the rope checked him long enough to allow the roan to scramble up. Frosty, feeling as if he had come apart in at least six pieces, managed to climb back into the saddle very much shaken.

It took him ten minutes to jerk the big steer down, and he had to jerk him down three times before the black animal was busted hard enough to tie up. Then it took half an hour more to get the steer necked up close to a stout tree, in order to think over his sins for a while.

It was just about then that Lon dashed up, to see his badly skinned-up dad and a

horse that looked as if he had been dragged down off the mountain.

"Will yuh lissen to me?" yelled Lon. "Yuh locoed old mossy-horn, roll your blankets and git outa here! Yuh look like yuh been run through a feed chopper. That ornary Cawdrey give yuh six of our toughest horses for your string. I got enough to worry about without havin' you around, tryin' to make a hand at yore age."

"*Tryin'* to make a hand?" bawled Frosty. "Hell, I could raise up in my coffin and make a hand on this two-bit Shetland pony outfit."

Then Lon noticed the black steer for the first time, and his eyes opened. "That black steer's nine years old, and I've heard only two riders ever got their twine on him," he remarked. "One lost his rope; the other almost got his horse gored to death. An' you come along an' git him?"

"Natcherally! They never had a real cowboy on this ranch before," said Frosty modestly, and then fifty separate pains hit him all at once. One knee cap was apparently knocked clear around to the back; a hip joint ached as if it had been lifted a few inches and a weird series of jangling bells were ringing in his ears.

When he got back to camp late in the afternoon, he was barely able to sit his saddle; his entire right leg was numb, and half of his face had been scraped raw by a cedar snag, while his leather jacket was hanging on him only by a few ragged strips.

Cutbank McBain took one look and brought out two bottles—one of whiskey, the other of liniment. But the enraged Frosty smashed the liniment bottle against the wagon wheel, and emptied half of the whiskey to show the sort of man he was.

He led down the black steer the next day in triumph, but he paid for that steer in every separate bone of his body, and he continued to pay during the days that followed. And it was all to no useful purpose. For if the shadows of a prison term for rustling hovered over Lon, there was no indication of it that Frosty could see.

Cutbank, however, insisted trouble was due to pop soon. He had overheard talk, he said mysteriously, an' it was a-stormin' up. They had moved to work the range just across the mountains from Lela Maxwell's ranch, which was separated from the Five Spoke by a drift fence.

Several times Frosty was on the point of coming out into the open and bring up the matter with Lon. But Lon was just the kind to blow up and send Frosty home. The hard riding and the hard-ground sleeping, all made Frosty peeved, and needing a goat, he used Cutbank's cooking.

Cutbank never had been able to cook, said Frosty; he couldn't make bread nor could he boil coffee. Lon had to drag the pair of oldsters apart one evening just before he left to go back to headquarters to see how things were stacking up. He promised to return the next morning.

IT was on the next day, before Lon had ridden back, that Frosty returned to the wagon early, having lost a rope and a wild steer. Losing a rope was embarrassing and he was relieved to find only Cutbank at camp. Lon had not yet returned from headquarters.

"I know su'thin' is up sure, now," said Cutbank darkly. "Lela Maxwell's brother brung over a letter for Lon this mornin' an' left it with me to give him. I reckon it's word about stole cattle."

"Lon ain't stole no cattle," maintained Frosty. "Yuh're fuller of grief than a buzzard croakin' by a pizen waterhole. Likely it's a letter from this Maxwell gal wantin' to be took to a dance. We'll read it and find out. I know Lon ain't mixed in no rustlin'. There ain't a drop of crooked blood in that boy. Gimme that letter."

"I dunno 'bout that," said Cutbank. "I promised to give it to Mister Falls."

"An' ain't I Mister Falls?" demanded Frosty. And Cutbank, having intended to give him the letter anyway, handed it over.

The envelope was sealed, but they steamed it open over the coffee pot spout. It was a short note, in feminine handwriting, and it said they had the catttle held in a corral, in the fork of Francisco and Little Francisco Canyons.

"Jist as I thought," said Cutbank. "Dirty work, and they've got Lon mixed in it somehow!"

Frosty Falls frowned bleakly. If the Maxwells were holding Five Spoke cattle, it looked bad. There was no excuse for Five Spoke cattle being in a corral on the Maxwell ranch as the drift fence stopped them from crossing the mountain.

"I'll ride over there an' look into this," said Frosty. "Soon's I git my rifle."

"If you ain't keerful, you're liable to find yoreself ridin' into a kettleful of trouble," predicted Cutbank. "Bull Cawdrey an' that dish-faced detective, Roberts, come back early this mornin' saddled fresh horses and rode off ag'in, lookin' mysterious."

Frosty roped a fresh horse, the hammerhead roan. He wanted to travel fast, and the roan was the horse for it. If anything, the roan bucked harder than he had the first morning, but Frosty pulled leather, buried his spurs in the cinch and took it. When he got the roan straightened out, he started off on a lope.

He climbed to the top of the mountain, knocked enough staples off the drift fence to get through and headed down the other side. Francisco Canyon once had been pointed out to him; and now he went plunging hell-bent down its steep sides.

Half an hour later, where the canyon forked, he saw a small pole corral back in some cottonwoods, and held in it were six or eight Five Spoke steers. Each of them was big and fat, weighing around one thousand three hundred pounds. At seven cents a pound that ran into money—and grand larceny.

Frosty snarled. Maybe Delilah Maxwell would give Lon a kiss for the present he had made her. For it looked almighty like Lon had done just that.

No one was in sight as he rode over to the corral to inspect them at closer range.

"It's her fault," Frosty groaned. "Lon was allus soft when it come to wimmen—rememberin' his mother. I'll wring her neck. I'll—" Then he broke off suddenly.

From a brushy screen behind him someone stepped out, a six-shooter in his paw. It was Roberts, the dish-faced, hollow-headed cowboy who Cutbank claimed was working on the ranch as detective.

"Throw up yore hands!" Roberts yelled. "I caught yuh cold! So you're the one that's been in cahoots with these Maxwells. We figgered it was someone else."

Bull Cawdrey, strode out from behind Roberts, and following him, two of the Five Spoke hands, both ugly-looking and particular friends of Cawdrey's. One of the men took Frosty's six-shooter, rifle and cartridge belt.

Bull was in a towering rage. "This wasn't the one," Bull told Roberts. "It was Lon—like we been tellin' yuh! What *you* doin' here?" he demanded of Frosty.

Frosty was trying to find an explanation that would free Lon of blame. Maybe Lon had known that some steers had gotten through the drift fence and had told the Maxwells to pick them up and hold them until he sent for them. But the steers couldn't have got through a four-wire fence without help, and if Lon had known they had broken through, he'd have sent some of his men after them.

"What does it look like I'm doin' here?" grunted Frosty, sparring for time.

"I caught you cold," chortled Roberts.

But Cawdrey was showing no gayety. "It's Lon—not this old coot, I'm tellin'

yuh!" he bellowed at Roberts. "Answer me, old rooster—how come yuh to be over here?"

"I had a hunch I'd find some strays down here," said Frosty. "Saw some tracks near a break in the fence." That was too bald-faced a lie to pass, but it was the best he could think of at the moment.

BULL CAWDREY pulled his six-shooter and held it in a foot of Frosty's head. He cocked the hammer. "Come clean," he ordered. "We know these steers were slipped through the drift fence, and we know Lon Falls was behind it. No use yore tryin' to protect him. Help us git the goods on Lon, and when I'm made manager in his place, I'll give yuh a soft job the rest of yore life."

If Lon had gotten the girl's letter before Frosty, and had ridden over, he'd have been caught red-handed at the corral. There was only one thing to do—Frosty must take the blame, and the prison stretch they'd hand him. It would be a long time before he slept on that Ever-Sink mattress back at his ranch.

"Yuh caught me," said Frosty. "I thought I could git away with these big fellers; butcher 'em out to sell for beef. But yuh got me."

Cawdrey all but frothed at the mouth. "You never stole these steers. Lon Falls did. He sent yuh here, maybe smellin' a trap. Come clean now. Admit that Lon sent yuh here; we know he stole these steers."

Then suddenly Frosty saw the light. He had been a damned fool for believing Lon was guilty of stealing. This was all a frame-up, engineered by Bull Cawdrey and his two men, and using the knot-headed cow detective as dupe. It had been Bull who had had the cattle put through the fence, sending word to the Maxwells to pen them. But in court Bull and the other two would swear they had watched Lon shove the steers off the Five Spoke on to the Maxwell place.

Without warning Frosty drove a lot of knuckles into Cawdrey's big face. Cawdrey bellowed and hit Frosty, knocked him from his saddle and dismounted to hit him again. Blood trickled out from Frosty's whiskers. Then they put him back on his horse without bothering to tie him.

"We'll take him down to the Maxwell place," said Bull. "An' see what we can git out of the girl!"

A pleasant looking place was the Maxwell outfit; a neat little adobe house, well-kept adobe corrals, and an orchard. It didn't look like a rustler's outfit. And it wasn't, for Lela Maxwell was as innocent in this affair as Lon.

A girl came out of the house as they rode up, a pretty girl with laughter in her eyes and hair that looked like cornsilk. She reminded Frosty of Lon's mother. And he had been thinking she was a She-Judas. That had been Cutbank's fault.

"You've been hurt!" she exclaimed, seeing the blood on Frosty's face. "Get down and let me fix you up. What happened?"

"I hit him," said Bull Cawdrey. "He's a cow-stealin' old reprobate and in cahoots with Lon Falls. Lon was afraid he'd get caught with those steers and sent this old toad over in his place."

"The Five Spoke steers in our corral up canyon?" exclaimed the girl. "There's some mistake. You," she addressed the meaner-looking of the two cowboys with Cawdrey, "rode down yesterday and told my brother to look out for some Five Spoke steers that got through the drift fence. He corraled 'em, and I wrote Lon a note we had them."

The cowboy brazenly faced Lela Maxwell and laughed "I wasn't in ten miles of yore place yesterday," he told her. "Bull an' Hutch here knows that; I was with 'em all day."

(Continued on page 121)

IN THE SADDLE

WE REMEMBER, years ago, when we first read about "the Old Outlaw Trail." It was in some story in a magazine whose name we have forgotten, which, perhaps is just as well. The story started out something like this: "Three men were camped a hundred yards to one side of the Old Outlaw Trail."

That really is funny. Because, from what we have learned on good authority, the so-called "Old Outlaw Trail" wasn't really a trail at all, in the ordinary sense of the word. Rather, it was a series of way-stations of naturally protected spots where usually one man could hold off almost any number of inquisitive lawman who happened to feel lucky enough to try to ride in. There, stolen horses could be kept, ready for their swift night drive to the next station. There also, brands could be safely blotted by men who well knew that risky occupation. And half hidden cabins furnished shelter, liquor and at times entertainment to those often tragic, reckless ex-cowboys who had ridden over the boundary of the law.

To many an Easterner, we imagine, it seems strange that such places could and did actually exist, but before the advent of automobiles and airplanes, those hide-outs offered badly-needed sanctuary to many a hard-riding, bullet-bitten member of the Dark Trail Society.

There's high drama in such places, and in the wild and reckless men who frequented them. And Walt Coburn in next month's issue, tells a tense, human novel which is laid along that self-same Outlaw Trail—all the way from the famous Robbers' Roost, in the southeastern corner of Utah, down to the Skull Canyon country in Arizona.

He tells of a range detective—far more a real cowboy than sleuth, by the way—who was forced to travel that risky and perilous journey—just in order to meet, face to face and gun to gun, the toughest bunch of train-robbers and shoot-in-the-back killers that ever burned powder to the tune of grinding engine drivers.

Just as an appetizer, here's a sample of the kind of man Dan Marlowe is, when he looks in on the double-crossing station agent, who was responsible for the murder of Dan's father at the hands of the train-robbers:

"Take a drink, Donaldson. Get your train orders straightened out, then write me a full confession, tellin' names an' dates of the hold-up. I'm askin' you one question before we go any further: Which one of the gang shot the engineer?"

"I don't know. So help me God, I don't! I didn't kill your father! You can't hang me for that!"

Dan's voice was calm—too calm. "How did you know that the engineer on that train was my father?"

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"That's right," said Bull, eying Frosty.

But Frosty believed Lela Maxwell. That girl spoke the truth, and this was a frame-up from start to finish. Lela Maxwell gasped. "You mean—" she said, a flush mantling her face "—that I—I lied?"

"Yeah, that's what we mean," said Bull, and Frosty growled and took a swing at Bull. He missed, which saved him from being knocked off his horse.

The range-detective, Roberts, had been frowning intently over the whole problem. "Yuh know," he said now, "there's something smelly about all this, Bull. Like it was a job put up on Lon—"

"Yuh think so?" bawled Bull Cawdrey. "Le's go talk this over," he suggested, "away from the house." And he, the cattle detective, the two cowboys, Ike Banner and the other, called Hutch, took Frosty out of sight of the house, below the solid-walled corrals of adobe bricks.

"Now look here, old rooster," Cawdrey told Frosty, "we'll fix it up so yuh come clear on this cow-stealin' charge. All yuh got to do is say Lon told yuh to come down here an' collect money for these cattle he shoved to the Maxwells."

"Yuh big crook," said Frosty, "yuh ought to be hung for tryin' to frame Lon, and that girl, too!"

"I'm beginnin' to think the same thing," stated the dish-faced cattle detective, who was honest if not exactly bright. "Looks like a frame-up, so's Bull could get Lon Falls' job. That's the way I'll report it."

Bull glowered at him, then turned to his two men. "Both these birds," said Bull, "is bein' stubborn. There's a way to git around that. We'll kill 'em both; an' say this old rooster reached for a gun—after implicatin' Lon in the rustlin'. We'll say he shot Roberts, an' then we had to let the daylight through this old bird."

"Yuh mean—yuh'd kill—us?" stuttered Roberts. "That would be murder!" Roberts was wilting, cowed by the three; and

(Continued on page 122)

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"I know I was a sucker for not starting when he did. But I was skeptical, and the training cost, even though small, looked like a lot of money with all my doctor bills. I know now that the most expensive thing I did was to put off this training, because I can see what it did for my brother."—E. B.

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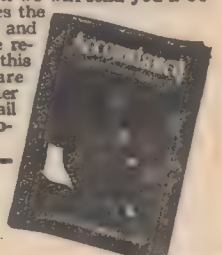

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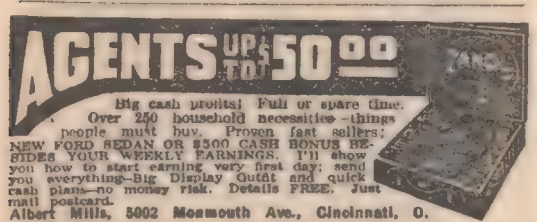

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(Continued from page 121)

would be no help to Frosty who had been disarmed. The cattle detective had a six-shooter in his holster and a carbine in his scabbard, but he hadn't the guts to go for either weapon.

IT WAS time for Frosty to start action. He spurred his horse forward, not against Cawdrey or his two men, but straight against Roberts' pony, reaching for the six-shooter Roberts was afraid to go for.

Hutch gave a startled yell. "Look out!" he bawled. "That old hellion is got a gun."

If Roberts had drawn that gun, likely the three would have laughed, but Frosty had plainly been tough in his day and was not too old to pull a trigger. The three spurred behind the adobe corral, Bull flinging back a hasty shot which sailed wide.

"Git to the house!" Frosty bawled at Roberts. "We got to hole up. Dig yore gut-hooks in that cockroach yuh're forkin'."

He whacked Roberts' pony over the rump and they lifted dust to the house. The girl flung open the door to meet them.

"We got to stand a siege here, miss," said Frosty as he fell off his horse and shoved Roberts ahead of him through the door. "Them three fellers has turned into a ornary bunch of killers!"

Shots were coming as he slammed the door shut behind them. The house, he was thankful, was an adobe, for well he knew that there were nothing like adobe walls in a gun-fight. Once from an adobe shack Frosty had held off a snooping sheriff and a couple deputies for three days, and he could have held out for three weeks, if his cartridges hadn't run out. That trouble had been put on him, of course; when a neighbor steals your cattle, even if you are a cooin' dove, you feel like taking some back in return.

Lela Maxwell was alone in the house. Frosty told her to keep out of bullet range and started barricading the door. Cawdrey and his two men had dismounted and were coming up slowly, taking advantage of adobe sheds and walls. Frosty had time for a word with Lela Maxwell while waiting for them.

"You know Lon Falls purty well?" he asked.

The girl blushed, which made her even prettier. "Why, yes," she said. "I know him quite well. He's awfully nice."

"Got a lotta faults, that boy," said Frosty. "But a future if he keeps out of trouble, like his dad learnt him. Mighty smart head on Lon. Takes after his pa thataway."

"Do you know Lon's father?" she asked. "I've wanted to meet him, but I'm almost afraid to. The cook over at the Five Spoke, Cutbank McBain, told me Lon's father had a terrible temper—so cantankerous he was always getting into trouble."

"Is that so?" said Frosty indignantly. "Cutbank told yuh that? Why, the lyin' ol'— I've knowed Frosty Falls for years, and a more peaceful feller yuh never saw. Often I've heerd him compared to a cooin' dove," said Frosty, sliding over the fact that it had been his own voice he had heard saying it.

"Jist a cooin'—" he went on, as the guns opened up outdoors and a shot knocked out a window pane and sang close to Frosty's head. Frosty let out a blood-curdling whoop and started a few whisker-burning epithets, but he was handicapped by the girl.

The cow detective whom he had assigned to take one side began emptying his rifle wildly.

"Hey, you," said Frosty, "you think we got ca'tridges to burn? Take one ca't-ridge and see how long yuh can make it last."

(Continued on page 124)

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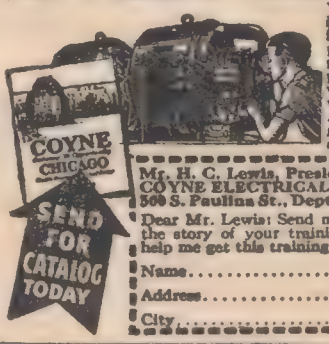

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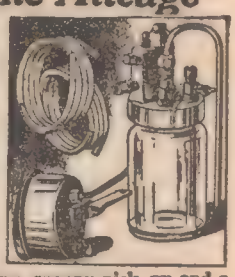

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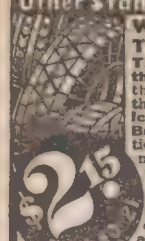

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29x5.00-19	2.85	1.2..
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.2..
5.25-17	2.90	1.3..
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.3..
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.3..
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.3..
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.3..
5.50-17	3.35	1.4..
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.4..
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.4..
6.00-17	3.40	1.4..
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.4..
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.4..
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.5..
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(Continued from page 123)

There were no guns in the house; all they had was the cattle detective's rifle and six-shooter. Frosty, with the six-shooter and the few cartridges in the belt, stayed near a window, occasionally risking an eye to peer out. Once he caught sight of one of the three attackers near the windmill and fired, coming within an ace of getting him. He must be getting old; well, anyway, middle-aged, he thought, to have missed that shot.

The rifles of the Cawdrey men gave off a steady roar, quickly knocking out all the panes in the windows. Threatened by a rush, Frosty sent an occasional stingy shot.

One man exposed a leg and Frosty snapped a bullet that took the heel off the fellow's boot. He shook his head sorrowfully. Yeah, he must be gettin' sorta middle-aged. In his day he'd have those three cleaned up by now. Nothin' but imitation badmen, but so loco with fear they'd stop at nothing—not even at killing the girl, in addition to Roberts and Frosty.

The cattle detective had emptied his rifle again and Frosty swore under his breath. The damn fool had gone plumb crazy. He was a washout all around, anyhow, carrying such a short ammunition supply. In the six-shooter cartridge belt there had been only seven cartridges, besides five in the gun. Frosty had used five so far. That left seven.

BULL and Hutch were behind the well-house, playing a smart game. While they worked on Frosty in the front of the house, getting him to waste a shot occasionally, out in back Ike teased Roberts into shooting up all his cartridges. After that they'd rush.

The fight couldn't last ten minutes, as Frosty saw it. The only thing left was to carry the battle to them while he still had a six-shooter full of cartridges. He'd

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simply throw open the door, step out to a finish fight with Bull and Hutch. They'd get him, but not before he'd rubbed them both out. With Bull and Hutch out of it, the other man would ride away. That was the only way to save Lon's girl. He'd been put on about enough; even a cooin' dove could stand only so much.

The battle light flaming in his old eyes, Frosty moved to unbolt the door. As he did so, Lela Maxwell, careless of bullets, caught his arm.

"You're not going out?" the girl exclaimed.

He smiled down on her. This was Lon's girl; some day she'd be Lon's wife. "Yeah, I'm goin' out to beat those birds to a rush before our ca'tridges is all gone. It's the only way to stop 'em. Those hombres have gone plumb crazy, honey; same as mad dogs."

"But—but they'll get you—kill you. One against two."

"Shucks," Frosty said, "that ain't no odds for a hell-on-wheels like me. But 'fore I go, I'd like to tell yuh one thing. I'm Lon's father. I want yuh to give him word, that if he don't marry yuh, I'll haunt him a-plenty. You'll be happy, you two, like Lon's mother and me."

The girl was weeping suddenly, wasting tears over Frosty Falls, who was all Cutbank had said about him—a cantankerous, trouble-huntin' old cuss who'd leave the world better off when he went. He patted the girl's shoulder, shoved her gently out of bullet range, and then, gripping his six-shooter, he clicked the bolt of the door back.

His hand was on the knob when a burst

(Concluded on page 126)

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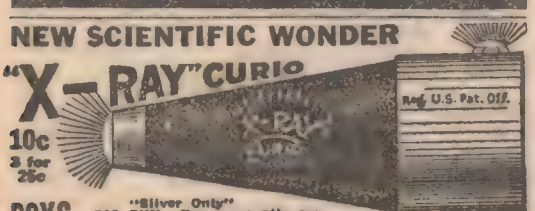

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(Concluded from page 125)

of firing came from a new set of guns—behind the corrals. From behind the well-house Hutch and Bull, suddenly frantic, bawled that they quit. The next instant the two stepped out into the open, their hands raised high, facing Lon and old Cutbank who rode in, rifles in their hands. The third cowhand was in full flight.

Frosty snorted belligerently and strode outdoors. "Jist when I was gittin' ready to end this yere fight," he bellowed at the newcomers, "you-all had to butt in. Who asked you to interfere in my personal ruckus?"

"What yuh been up to?" Lon demanded. "Cutbank told me yuh'd headed over this way after openin' that letter Lela wrote me. What cattle did she mean?"

"Knowed there'd be gun trouble in this country," remarked Cutbank, "soon's yore heller of a dad showed up. What yuh been doin', yuh old renegade?"

"Been bustin' up a conspiracy," stated Frosty. "They was a-framin' yuh, Lon, but it boomeranged on 'em. That feller Roberts has all the dope. He'll tell yuh. Me, I ain't got time: I got to start back for my ranch; can't trust nobuddy to look after my outfit."

Frosty caught a glance of Lela Maxwell in the doorway and grinned. "But how about a weddin before I go, son? I could put off goin' for a few days, although this country plumb burns me up. These mountains is too ding level an' the cattle too tame to be interestin'. And, besides," he added wtih a malignant look at Cutbank, "the cookin' would plumb ruin the disposition of a cooin' dove!"

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IN THE SADDLE

(Concluded from page 120)

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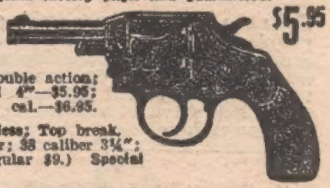

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